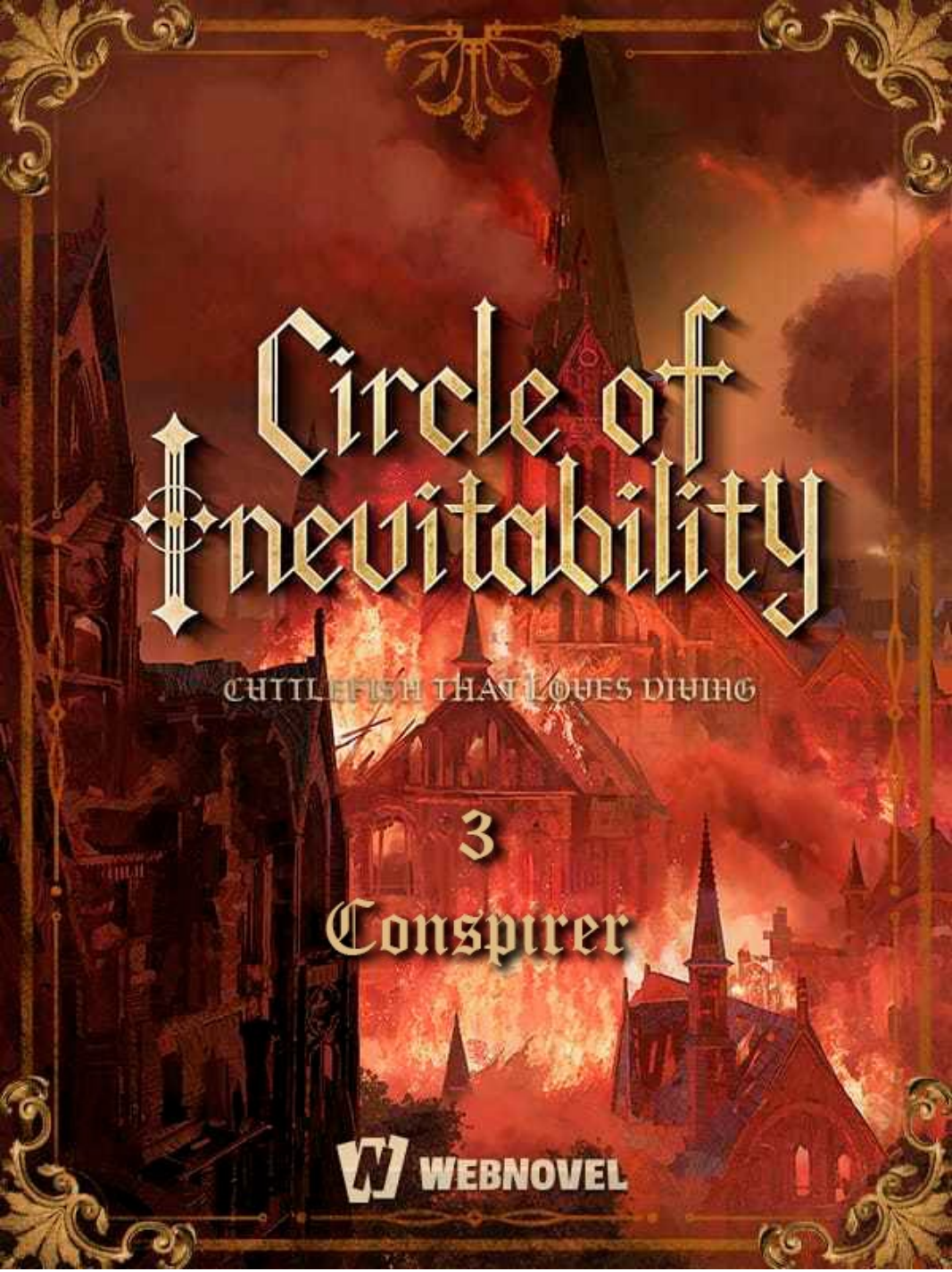
Circle of Inevitability
CUTTLEFISH THAT LOVES DIVING
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Conspirer
WEBNOVEL

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Chapter 264: Secret Organization

Volume Opening: Everyone is a hunter, and everyone is prey.

"Deputy Director of Loen Kingdom's MI9 Spotted in the Crossfire of Market District Terror!"

"Fiery Debate at National Convention: Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Role in Hugues Artois Assassination!"

"Shocking Malpractice!"

"Negotiating the Limits: Two Churches in Talks Over Parliamentary Immunity Restrictions"

"No Oath, No Immunity: Debating the Rights of Unsworn Members"

"National Convention or Heretic Haven?"

"Hugues Artois Shielding Heretics Behind Market District Terrorism!"

The headlines from different newspapers stood out, capturing Jenna's attention under the blazing afternoon sun. She scanned the newspapers' headlines, witnessing the fervent debate taking place from different angles.

Jenna's gaze eventually settled on the wanted posters adorning the newsstand's side.

"Guillaume Bénet..."

"Pualis de Roquefort..."

"Lumian Lee..."

"Celia Bello..."

Jenna stared at her own poster, finding it peculiarly enchanting.

The portrait displayed bore no resemblance to her; her features were almost reversed, except for her undeniable beauty. Even her brother Julien would fail to recognize her as his sister, let alone any bounty hunters.

And so, Jenna continued her studies at the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons by day, and entertained audiences with her voice at the Salle de Bal Brise by night, making ends meet. Her life remained unchanged, just as it had been.

If it weren't for the daily newspaper debates surrounding Hugues Artois's demise and the ensuing conflicts, Jenna would have doubted whether her act of assassinating him was merely a dream born out of emotional turmoil.

Based on Franca's findings and her own speculations, the official Beyonders seemed to appreciate Jenna's elimination of Hugues Artois. They believed she had made a significant contribution in eradicating a group of heretics. Had it not been for the pressure from the National Convention and the various restrictions in place, they might have even considered honoring Jenna with a medal.

Hence, they intentionally spread misleading information, crafting a wanted poster that deviated from reality. They employed an investigation as a pretext to aid Jenna's brother, Julien, in purging the malicious powers that had destabilized his emotions. They cured his latent psychological illness and provided him with a legitimate occupation as a fitter, all under the guise of humanitarianism and support for believers.

For Jenna, aside from the necessity to avoid her neighbors whenever she encountered Julien, her life remained relatively unhindered. She pursued her studies in theater acting and transformed into Showy Diva whenever the need arose.

Drawing from Franca's experience, if Jenna lingered in the market district for a few more days, the Purifiers of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church would likely approach her, sharing common knowledge and taboos to prevent any accidental disasters caused by her wild Beyonder powers. They might even attempt to recruit her as an informant.

If it were a Beyonder from the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, they might choose to observe her covertly, trailing her steps and uncovering the source of her Beyonder characteristic. Depending on the circumstances, they would determine whether to apprehend her immediately and transform her into an informant or play the long game to capture more significant players. The Purifiers, on the other hand, would likely adopt a more transparent approach, considering Jenna's substantial assistance in their cause.

Jenna paid little mind to these matters. If the official Beyonders sought her capture, she would flee. If they wished to recruit her as an informant, she would comply. And if they disregarded her altogether, she would continue working to repay her debts and save for next year's tuition.

Retracting her gaze, Jenna, dressed in a grayish-white gown, stepped out of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. She turned towards Rue des Blouses Blanches, seeking some rest before adorning her face with smoky and decadent makeup, preparing to become the captivating Showy Diva at the Salle de Bal Brise.

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca, clad in a blouse, light-colored breeches, and wooden slippers, warmly greeted Lumian.

"Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons proves more profitable than anticipated!"

At the heretic's estate charity auction for the post-disaster reconstruction, Gardner Martin had acquired Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons for 50,000 verl d'or and entrusted its management

to Franca. Most of the profits were left in her hands as his mistress.
During the auction, he had also secured Auberge du Coq Doré for 2,000 verl d'or. Occasionally, he dispatched individuals to conduct peculiar investigations, as if seeking to uncover the truth behind the disaster.
Lumian undoubtedly took charge of the daily operations.
As the weather warmed, Lumian embraced the change by donning a light brown pair of trousers, a crisp white shirt, and a black waistcoat. He didn't bother with a coat.
Rather than inquire about the profits of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, Lumian surveyed the surroundings and posed a question.
"I wish to know more about the secret organization we've joined."
He had initially assumed Franca would inform him at an opportune moment. However, after waiting for several days, it seemed Franca had forgotten about the matter, leaving Lumian no choice but to seek answers himself.
Franca was taken aback, her surprise evident as she blurted out, "You don't know?"
You joined without any knowledge of the organization?
Had it not been for Madam Judgment's confirmation that Lumian was a member, Franca would have suspected he was bluffing and hadn't actually joined.
Lumian explained sincerely, "I was on probation before, and after passing the assessment, my Major Arcana card left it to you to reveal the details."
Franca accepted the explanation, recalling her own limited knowledge during her early days with the organization.
She settled back into the recliner, crossing her legs and straightening her posture.
"We are all members of the Tarot Club."
Tarot Club... Upon hearing the name, Lumian, already seated on the opposite sofa, showed no surprise. After all, members of this clandestine group adopted tarot cards as their code names. The core members were associated with the Major Arcana cards, while ordinary members bore the Minor Arcana cards.
Franca's face gradually lit up with pride.
"Our Tarot Club is the most exceptional secret organization in the entire world. One could even argue it is among the most powerful."
"That's because our leader is a supreme entity standing at the apex of all deities. In other secret organizations, the deities they serve merely watch over and provide divine insight. They do not actively participate. However, before Mr. Fool descended into a deep

slumber, He regularly convened gatherings in His divine kingdom for the Major Arcana cardholders. What do we call it? A true Divine Council! Other Churches may have so-called Divine Councils, but at best, they are meetings held under the watchful gaze of a deity. It is not a gathering conducted in the presence of a deity with the deity's direct involvement."
Franca pressed a hand to her chest and offered a slight bow.
"Praise The Fool!"
Lumian had contemplated the Tarot Club's potential. After all, Madam Magician exuded an air of mystery and power. Yet, he never anticipated that the great existence she spoke of would be the leader of the Tarot Club.
This shattered his preconceived notions of deities.
After a moment of contemplation, he voiced his thoughts.
"Is Mr. Fool called 'The Fool' because He holds The Fool card from the Major Arcana?"
So He, too, is a member of the Tarot Club?
"That is partly the reason," Franca replied after a brief pause. "However, no one can confirm it. I suspect it is because 'The Fool' is one of the many honorific names bestowed upon Mr. Fool. Hence, when establishing the secret organization, He chose the name 'Tarot Club' and assigned different tarot cards to each member."
"But can we really address Him directly as 'Mr. Fool'?" Lumian questioned, finding it somewhat blasphemous or disrespectful to refer to a deity using the honorific 'Mr.' It seemed too ordinary and lacked the necessary sanctity.
Franca smiled and assured him, "There is no issue. It is said that Mr. Fool Himself quite enjoys this form of address."
Seeing that Lumian had no further inquiries, Franca continued.
"In many ritualistic magics, if you are unable to find a suitable recipient for your prayers, you can seek aid from Mr. Fool. Although the process may differ from your expectations, it will invariably lead to the desired outcome in a wondrous manner."
"The only caveat is that Mr. Fool is in a deep slumber, and we must not disturb Him too often. According to my Major Arcana card, we should not do so more than once a month unless absolutely necessary. Reciting His honorific name alone will not draw attention or assistance. In fact, it may result in failure and pose a certain risk. The power inadvertently released by a slumbering deity is capable of obliterating us countless times over. Thus, we must perform a ritual to ensure our safety."
Madam Magician had mentioned this before, but as per her explanation, Mr. Fool's slumber holds more significance than mere sleep... Franca seems unaware of the details? Lumian

contemplated this as he asked thoughtfully, "What kind of deity is Mr. Fool?"
Franca cleared her throat and replied, "My lecture wouldn't do it justice. Haha, I don't remember all that much. I suggest you visit Mr. Fool's cathedral and listen to the bishop's sermons."
"Mr. Fool's cathedral?" Lumian exclaimed in surprise.
Was there a cathedral dedicated to Mr. Fool in Trier?
Weren't there only two Churches in Intis?
Franca explained, "Mr. Fool's Church primarily resides in the Rorsted Archipelago of the Sonia Sea and some locations in the Southern Continent. However, due to the beliefs of many merchants, sailors, bounty hunters, and treasure seekers at sea, we often encounter followers of Mr. Fool at Lavigny Docks in the square district."
"Later, for certain reasons, the two Churches agreed to construct a small cathedral there for Mr. Fool's Church, allowing passing sea merchants to offer their prayers. However, proselytizing or preaching outside the cathedral is strictly prohibited. Most Trieriens are unaware of its existence."
The square district lay on the north bank of the Srenzo River, west of Trier. Lavigny Docks bustled with various goods arriving from numerous seaside ports. Sea merchants frequently passed through, while sailors sought to experience the vibrancy and prosperity of Trier.
To the west of Lavigny Docks stood Trocadéro Town, renowned for its Trocadéro liquor.
Lumian nodded and said, "I shall find time to visit and listen."
With that settled, he asked curiously, "What is the connection between Mr. Fool's Church and our Tarot Club?"

Chapter 265: The Major Arcana Cards

Franca, sitting cross-legged in the recliner, had long pondered over this question. After careful consideration, a smile curved on her lips as she spoke,

"Mr. Fool's Church is akin to an independent subsidiary of our Tarot Club."

Observing Lumian's bewilderment, she went on to explain, "Each of our Tarot Club's Major Arcana Cards represents an influential figure in the world, be it in reality or mysticism. I suspect that the Pope of The Fool's Church is one such figure. As for the other Major Arcana Cards, they may lead different organizations. While these organizations might not believe in Mr. Fool, they can provide assistance to certain operations of the Tarot Club."

"To put it simply, the Tarot Club is the highest governing body directly overseen by Mr. Fool. Each holder of a Major Arcana card possesses a distinguished status and their own sphere of influence. And one such holder is The Fool's Church," Franca elaborated.

Lumian grasped Franca's meaning roughly and inquired, "How many Major Arcana cards do we have?"

Franca shook her head and replied, "I cannot provide an exact number as the identities of the Major Arcana card holders are kept confidential. The only card we interact with the most is the Major Arcana card to which we are subordinate. Well... mine is Madam Judgment."

"Mine is Madam Magician," Lumian added.

Franca chuckled, "It seems that these two cards often appear together. Yes, our Tarot Club has a habit of scattering the entire deck of tarot cards at the scene after completing a task. We also place the card that represents us in the most prominent position..."

"Isn't that wasteful?" Lumian interrupted Franca.

"What harm is there in using a deck of tarot cards? Don't you find such actions cool?" Franca muttered. "You can leave the card that represents you, but what use is a deck without one? You'll have to buy a new one next time. If you visit the factory and customize a large number of tarot cards with just one card, you'll become an easy target."

"I can draw it myself," Lumian proposed, already formulating a solution.

While he couldn't replicate the printed quality, he could capture the main characteristics of the Seven of Wands.

Franca fell silent for a moment, then said, "Wouldn't something

you draw have a mystical connection? Wouldn't you have to expend energy to counter divination?"
"Sigh, we don't have to scatter them every time. We don't have to scatter them when working with non-Tarot Club members. We don't have to scatter them during stealth missions, such as the one we're on now. And we don't have to scatter them when we're under suspicion.
"Dammit! How did we get off track? What I wanted to convey is that due to the Tarot Club's customs and traditions, I've learned from various newspapers and mystical gatherings about the more active Major Arcana cards.
"Madam Justice has appeared multiple times on the Midseashire coast, in Trier, and Backlund. Mr. Hanged Man has made appearances at sea. We have Madam Hermit and Mr. Sun, as well as Mr. Moon and Mr. Star from the Southern Continent. As for any other Major Arcana card holders, I'm unaware."
Madam Justice, Mr. Hanged Man, Mr. Sun, Madam Hermit, Mr. Star, Mr. Moon... Lumian realized that the names possessed an air of mystery and sophistication, unlike the mundane-sounding Seven of Wands and Two of Cups.
After pondering for a while, he recognized a crucial point mentioned by Franca: Madam Justice had been seen in Midseashire, Trier, and Backlund.
Apart from Madam Judgment and Madam Magician, this was the only Major Arcana card with confirmed sightings in Trier.
Lumian distinctly recalled that Madam Susie had mentioned the possibility of people from the West Midseashire Coast being Beyonders of the Spectator pathway.
This implied that she had a good understanding of the West Midseashire Coast.
Considering that she and the other Psychiatrist were in Trier, their areas of activity overlapped by at least two-thirds with Madam Justice's.
Furthermore, when Madam Magician mentioned that the two Psychiatrists were equals and that his psychological problem involved matters at a higher level, Lumian suspected that one of them was Madam Justice.
Based on the fact that both Madam Magician and Madam Judgment preferred to address themselves with tarot cards and conceal their true names, it was more likely that the enigmatic lady sitting across from him was the holder of the Major Arcana card, Justice. Susie, on the other hand, seemed to be her subordinate Minor Arcana card.
With these thoughts in mind, Lumian glanced at Franca, who had

adjusted her sitting position, and spoke, "Were you planning to find a genuine Psychiatrist for Jenna's brother from within our Tarot Club?"
Franca, confused by Lumian's sudden change of topic, was taken aback.
"No, I intended to approach members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.
"I try my best not to contact my Major Arcana, Madam Judgment unless it's a particularly critical or serious matter. Although she always appears composed and willing to help, do you know? She's a true demigod and a prominent figure with godlike status. I can't burden her with trivial matters frequently. She says she doesn't mind, but who knows if she's truly honest. Each insignificant problem might decrease her favor towards me.
"When her favorability drops to a certain extent, a demigod has numerous ways to make your life unbearable. Besides, you won't even know why it's happening.
"I usually handle things on my own. If that fails, I turn to Gardner Martin or the members of the Research Society. And if that doesn't work, I consider reaching out to Madame Judgment."
Lumian shared the same sentiment, but he had the excuse of reporting the mission's situation and suppressing Termiboros's influence. He could write to Madam Magician from time to time to gather information.
In any case, he was already in the process of writing a letter. There was no harm in asking!
Observing that Franca's Psychiatrist wasn't the same as his own, Lumian didn't mention Susie. He nodded gently and replied, "Same here."
Franca glanced around and lowered her voice.
"However, don't hesitate to seek help when you need it. The resources and influence wielded by Major Arcana card holders exceed your imagination. What you find difficult can be resolved with a mere command or thought.
"Wasn't my mystical item, the Ring of Punishment, incredibly powerful? Madame Judgment granted it to me directly upon my request. She even allowed me to owe an equivalent exchange for a period of time.
"Uh... I see how you obtained the Pyromaniac potion formula and its main ingredient so quickly!"
You're not wrong... Lumian smiled, conveying to Franca that she had hit the mark.
He believed that if he could acquire Beyonder characteristics that complemented the Shadow Branch, he could genuinely seek the

help of Madam Magician in finding a saint-level Artisan to craft the corresponding mystical item.
Compared to him, who was only a Sequence 7, Madam Magician, already a demigod, was more likely to be acquainted with a high-level Artisan!
Franca exhaled and continued the conversation.
"Every bearer of a Major Arcana card is a demigod, with a high probability of being a saint. At the very least, the more active ones don't seem to be at the level of Grounded Angels. However, Madam Judgment told me that the Tarot Club has more than one angel!"
At least eight saints, and more than one angel? They're even stronger than the Aurora Order... Truly befitting the most extraordinary secret organization... Lumian sighed, wondering if the Tarot Club's core members were exaggerating to instill a stronger sense of belonging among their subordinates.
With a yearning expression, Franca added, "My current dream is to progress step by step to Sequence 5, then advance to Sequence 4 of the Hunter pathway and become a demigod. That would grant me the right to obtain a Major Arcana card.
"Not only would it mean greater strength and a sense of security, but it would also allow me to participate in the Divine Council and ask Mr. Fool about things once he awakens."
According to Madam Magician, obtaining a Major Arcana card isn't dependent on advancing to Sequence 4 and becoming a demigod... Lumian dealt Franca a blow to prevent her from having overly high expectations.
However, Franca didn't mind at all. She smiled and said, "In any case, my question will have to wait until Mr. Fool wakes up. When the time comes, demigods will undoubtedly be more qualified than other members to obtain a Major Arcana card."
At this point, she looked at Lumian and continued, "Apart from us, there are four more Minor Arcana cards active in Trier. In total, there are 23 cards in the world, but there might be fewer. Many Beyonders find it fashionable to scatter tarot cards at the scene of an incident and intentionally imitate us. They might do it to misdirect the official Beyonders' investigation.
"In Trier, the most renowned card is the Knight of Swords. At the beginning of the year, he detonated a warehouse belonging to the Southern Continent's terrorist organization, the Rose School of Thought. The warehouse concealed a significant amount of explosives, and non-human remains were found at the scene..."
Lumian listened attentively to Franca's account, gaining a better understanding of the Tarot Club and the Major Arcana and Minor Arcana cards.

After a brief moment of contemplation, he asked, "Do Minor Arcana cards have gatherings in the world of mysticism?"
"No," Franca shook her head again. "Unless we meet in person, like we have, we can only communicate through our respective Major Arcana cards. Yes, regular gatherings do take place between Major Arcana cards in Mr. Fool's divine kingdom!
"However, Madame Judgment mentioned once that in urgent situations, with the assistance of our Major Arcana, we can communicate in a way that transcends reality, but such occurrences are rare."
Lumian had no further questions. After chatting for a while, he heard Jenna's footsteps ascending the stairs.
He stood up, preparing to leave.
"Where are you going?" Franca asked, puzzled.
At this hour, there was nothing for him to do in Salle de Bal Brise, so he might as well stay and play Fighting Evil, the game Emperor Roselle had "invented."
Lumian smiled, a mix of emotions in his expression.
"To the catacombs."
The ashes of the lunatic Flameng and the Ruhr couple were finally being laid to rest in the catacombs.

Chapter 266: Catacombs

Outside the police headquarters in the bustling market district, Lumian, donning the enigmatic Prying Glasses, climbed aboard the carriage adorned with painted irises.

Two ordinary constables, clad in black uniforms, occupied the seats opposite, their feet resting beside three somber urns. The names of the departed flickered in fluorescent ink.

Taking his place across from them before the carriage slowly steered forward, Lumian caught the older constable's inquisitive gaze.

"What brings you here? What's your connection to these departed souls?"

He remembered that two of the deceased had neither kin nor friends, and the remaining one had distant relatives who trembled at the mere mention of the name Flameng. Not only were they unwilling to come and collect the ashes and relics, but they also reluctantly admitted that they were related by blood or marriage.

Lumian responded calmly.

"I'm their landlord, in a manner of speaking."

"Just the landlord?" The older constable appeared skeptical.

"Officer, a landlord is a person too. They can feel for others!" Lumian chuckled. "I've shared a drink or had a chat with them. Accompanying their remains into the catacombs isn't a big deal."

The younger constable feigned disinterest, gazing out the window, while the older constable exuded an air of familiarity.

"Youth suits you well. But in the motel or apartment business in the market district, you must guard against developing attachments to tenants. Otherwise, you'll either be deceived or heartbroken. After a few more such experiences, your enthusiasm for others will wane."

Lumian offered a perfunctory reply, and the constable broached another subject.

"We still have Flameng's belongings. His kin refuse to collect them. Would you like them? If not, we'll handle it ourselves."

"I'll take a look when I return from the catacombs," Lumian replied nonchalantly.

During the journey from the market district to the Place du Purgatoire in Quartier de l'Observatoire, the older constable chatted away, alternating between engaging Lumian and attempting to draw his colleague into conversation. His chatter seemed ceaseless.

Finally reaching their destination, Lumian disembarked from the carriage, cradling Ruhr's ashes in his arms. Despite his outgoing

nature, Lumian felt a newfound relief, as if his ears had been granted respite.
The catacomb administrator, whom Lumian had encountered before, awaited their arrival.
In his mid-thirties, of average build, with curly brown hair, a thick beard, and slightly upturned eyes, he sported yellow pants, a white shirt, and a blue vest.
"Kendall, why is it you again?" the older constable greeted him warmly.
Kendall held an unlit carbide lamp and smiled.
"Robert, I heard you were coming, so I made sure to delay my other duties and be here for you."
As Kendall spoke, he scrutinized Lumian and emphasized, "You didn't forget to bring the white candles, did you?"
"That will be the last thing I forget!" Robert, clutching Flameng's urn, fumbled in his pocket and retrieved three white candles. He tossed one to his colleague and another to Lumian.
With everything in order, Kendall ignited the carbide lamp and turned around, leading them deeper into the darkness, down the stone staircase comprising 138 steps.
Along the way, they passed a heavy wooden door engraved with two imposing Sacred Emblems and traversed a hushed corridor where even the sound of their breaths seemed amplified.
Lumian was no stranger to such a foreboding atmosphere, but the young constable displayed signs of nervousness. He clutched Madame Michel's urn tightly, seeking solace.
After traversing a broad avenue, illuminated by gas street lamps, the quartet arrived at the catacombs' entrance.
The natural cavern, subsequently modified, stood silently in the dim yellow glow. Skulls, skeletal arms, sunflowers, and reliefs depicting steam elements adorned both sides. Beyond them, an impenetrable darkness loomed.
Etched on the lintel were two inscriptions in Intisian:
"Halt!
"The Death Empire lies ahead!"
Although Lumian had witnessed this sight before, he still felt a profound sense of reverence.
Unlike his previous curiosity and confusion, he now keenly grasped the gravity conveyed by these warnings and the surrounding environment.
Beneath Trier's surface lurked countless perils capable of obliterating the entire city and even Intis itself. These dangers included, but were not limited to, Trier, the Tree of Shadow, and invisible flames from the Fourth Epoch. The catacombs, situated

here, were unlikely to be innocuous.
According to Osta Trul, a Secrets Suppliant, visitors who descended into the catacombs with lit white candles invoked the protection of a concealed entity, akin to a ritual.
Lumian couldn't help but suspect that opening such a place to the public served to suppress some subterranean peril, much like the new city erected upon Trier in the Fourth Epoch.
Kendall turned to Lumian and the others.
"It's time to light the candles. We must ensure they don't go out before we leave the catacombs.
"If we happen to get separated, don't panic. Look for a road sign. If you can't find one, follow the black line above you until you reach the exit."
With Kendall holding the carbide lamp, Lumian and the two others ignited their white candles, casting a soft yellowish glow.
As the four candles flickered gently, Kendall extinguished the carbide lamp and led the way through the boulder gate, entering the realm of the Death Empire.
Lumian followed closely behind, clutching the urn in one hand and the white candle in the other.
Suddenly, a chill swept over him, sending shivers down his spine.
But the cold didn't originate from his surroundings; it emanated from deep within his heart, causing his hair to stand on end.
Simultaneously, Lumian felt eyes fixed upon him, their gazes piercing his soul.
Using the flame of his candle, he looked to his right and saw pits carved into the stone wall, each one containing a ghastly skeletal corpse.
The hollow-eyed skulls stared at him lifelessly, devoid of emotion.
Lumian didn't avert his gaze as he carefully observed the corpses. He realized that the eerie sensation of being watched didn't stem from them, yet the feeling remained.
An instinctive urge to activate his Spirit Vision surged within him, but he had changed since arriving in Trier. He had encountered enough to know that many warnings were inscribed with blood and tears by those who came before him.
I shouldn't look at what I shouldn't... Since it poses no danger to me, there's no need to search for the source of this abnormality... Lumian silently muttered, turning his attention to the police officers beside him.
They seemed oblivious to any anomaly and continued following the tomb administrator, Kendall, as if everything was normal.
This made Lumian suspect that the experience was a result of the qualitative change in his spirituality after his advancement to

Pyromaniac.
It's good that you can't feel it... Lumian couldn't help but sigh.
Under the weight of countless gazes, his skin erupted in goosebumps.
He cautiously looked up and saw a thick black line painted on the top of the tomb, with an arrow pointing toward the exit.
As he advanced, Lumian noticed that both sides of the path were lined with bones. Some were nestled in pits along the stone walls, others were piled by the roadside, and some were covered by tattered garments. Some lay bare, stripped of all burial items, their skulls coated in a layer of dark green mold. The air carried a diluted scent of decay.
The catacombs were divided into multiple chambers, each designated by name, ensuring visitors could locate specific remains.
Lumian and his companions followed Kendall through the narrow passage between the tomb chapel and the tomb memorial pillar. Ahead, they saw dozens of yellowish candles.
At times, the flames clustered together like fireflies in the night, while other times they formed a river of dim starlight.
Lumian glanced around casually and spotted a bride, her face veiled in white, adorned in a sanctified gown. Beside her stood a groom in a black tailcoat, a floral handkerchief adorning his chest pocket. Surrounding them were 30 to 40 youths, holding lit white candles and laughing merrily.
"What's happening?" Lumian couldn't hide his confusion.
Kendall scoffed and explained, "It's part of a wedding ceremony.
"Since last year, newlyweds have been bringing young guests into the catacombs, crossing paths with the deceased. It's become a popular tradition in Trier. Young folks are always daring, taking pride in their courage and delighting in scaring others. I've seen guests purposely pick up skeletal hands and pat the bride and groom on the shoulder, nearly causing them to faint in fear."
Oh, you Trierians... Lumian shook his head in amusement.
It didn't take long for the four of them to reach their destination, the Tomb of Lights.
In the center stood a black pedestal, atop which an obelisk painted white bore the emblem of the Sun. At its peak rested an ancient, extinguished oil lamp. The walls and floor were filled with bones, urns, and countless tear bottles.
Upon entering, Lumian realized a problem.
"Where are Flameng's relatives?"
He had wanted Flameng to rest alongside his children, wife, and parents.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Lumian suddenly understood why Flameng hadn't specified the location of his kin's remains.

He felt guilty and self-reproachful. Flameng desired to be with his family, yet he didn't dare approach them. He intended to stay in the same chamber and watch over them from a distance.

An indescribable sorrow enveloped Lumian as he stood silently, choosing to honor Flameng's final wish. He found an empty spot and gently placed the urn of the troubled soul.

Once Robert and the others had arranged the urns of the Ruhr couple, the four of them offered simultaneous prayer, either uttering "Praise the Sun" or "By Steam."

On their way back, they encountered the newlyweds and their young entourage.

As Lumian brushed past them, he noticed a young couple in the group. Seizing the moment when the tomb administrator's attention waned, they impulsively attempted to blow out the white candle in their hands, curious to see what would happen.

Whoosh!

They had indeed done it.

The two yellowish flames were extinguished.

In that instant, Lumian's mind turned adrift.

Quickly regaining his composure, he realized the young couple had vanished without a trace.

They're gone... Lumian's eyes widened as he tried to comprehend the situation.

A few seconds later, he accepted the undeniable truth.

The young couple had truly vanished!

Lumian then shifted his gaze back to the entourage.

Whether it was the newlyweds leading the way, the attending guests, or those at the rear, no one seemed to notice anyone missing. They continued to smile, joke, and move forward.

Chapter 267: Remains

For a moment, Lumian thought he must be seeing things.

There was no sign of the couple, nor any attempt to put out the candle flames!

If Lumian hadn't witnessed it himself and been well aware of the dangers lurking in Underground Trier, he might have questioned whether the problem was with his own mind rather than searching for any trace of the couple's existence.

The people behind the couple hastened their steps and caught up to the person in front, closing the sudden gap in the procession.

They showed no surprise, fear, or confusion.

Everything appeared normal.

Lumian, already aware of the countless unseen gazes fixed upon him, felt the goosebumps on his skin intensify.

Subconsciously, he glanced at Kendall, the tomb administrator, who led the way with two police officers, to gauge his reaction to the recent events.

Clad in yellow trousers and a blue vest, Kendall held an extinguished carbide lamp in one hand and a quietly burning white candle in the other. He walked directly toward the exit of the catacombs, seemingly oblivious to the strange happenings surrounding the entourage.

Suddenly, Kendall turned around and met Lumian's gaze.

"Is something the matter?" Kendall's deep voice reverberated through the passageway, echoing in the nearby skull chambers.

Lumian maintained a composed demeanor and replied calmly, "I'm afraid I might get lost."

Kendall nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Then I'll slow down."

He continued toward the exit, deliberately reducing his pace. He staggered slightly, remaining silent, resembling a zombie from a horror novel.

Lumian held the flickering yellow candle and passed by the laughing wedding party participants, who occasionally made eye contact with the white skulls. Thoughts raced through his mind.

They truly didn't notice that someone was missing...

When they leave the catacombs, will the families of the man and woman discover their absence?

I've always wondered. The catacombs are open to the public, and university students often take risks and dance among the bones. Are there truly no issues?

Even visitors guided by the catacomb administrators disobey the warnings, let alone youngsters who venture in with a solitary

white candle...
Initially, I believed there were safety measures or that accidents were infrequent enough not to deter those individuals. Now, it seems to be a different matter altogether...
Lumian suspected that not only would the body of the person "consumed" by the catacombs vanish, but even the memory of their existence would be erased from the minds of friends and relatives!
Why can I remember them? Could it be because Termiboros is sealed within me, connecting my fate to His to some extent?
Why do the government and the two Churches continue to open such a perilous place to the public? Do the catacombs require a constant flow of living people to keep something suppressed? Are those who disregard the warnings deemed necessary sacrifices?
The more Lumian dwelled on it, the more his hair stood on end. He forced himself not to delve further into the analysis.
Without sufficient information, he couldn't explore the matter any deeper.
Regardless, there was nothing worth investigating within the catacombs. Visiting occasionally posed no threat as long as he adhered to the rules!
Once they entered the catacombs, the "talkative" police officer, Robert, fell silent, clearly uncomfortable in the environment.
With his silence, the conversation ceased. In an indescribable silence, the quartet retraced their steps to the natural entrance adorned with intricate reliefs and emerged back into the open.
As soon as Lumian crossed the threshold, he sensed the countless invisible gazes vanish.
The chill in his body dissipated, and his skin quickly returned to normal.
"Phew..." Robert exhaled deeply. "I always feel uneasy whenever I'm in the catacombs. Kendall, how can you go in more than ten times a day and still be so cheerful?"
Kendall chuckled and replied, "Do you think we remain unaffected? If we're not on night duty, those with families rush to find their wives. If not, they head to places like Rue de la Muraille and bask in the warmth of others."
"To be honest, after spending so much time here, I feel as if I'm slowly turning into a corpse."
As they conversed, Kendall lit the carbide lamp and extinguished the candle in his hand.
Returning to the surface, Robert glanced at the police headquarters carriage parked outside the entrance building and sheepishly smiled at his colleague and Lumian.

"That prolonged discomfort makes me need to use the loo. Wait for me. I'll go to the restroom first."
With that, he headed toward the two-story building, painted a muddy gray, which served as the ticket office for the catacombs.
Lumian gazed at the stone-engraved dome and positioned himself by a pillar at the edge, absentmindedly observing the pedestrians on Place du Purgatoire. The other police officer boarded the carriage and settled in to wait.
At that moment, Lumian felt a sudden chill.
It resembled the sensation he experienced upon entering the catacombs, though not as intense.
Instinctively, he warily turned around and saw Kendall, the tomb administrator, standing behind him, wearing an expressionless face.
"What's the matter?" Lumian calmly inquired.
Kendall, with his thick brown beard, spoke in a deep voice, "What were you looking at?"
Lumian's heart sank as he responded with a mixture of sincerity and pretense,
"Which aspect are you referring to?"
"When we passed by that group of people on our way back." Kendall's tone remained neutral.
Lumian acted as though a light bulb had switched on.
"I find the concept of a wedding among the dead quite intriguing. They seemed unafraid and were enjoying themselves."
Kendall scrutinized him for a couple of seconds before nodding.
"Don't imitate them."
With that, the tomb administrator carried the unlit carbide lamp and made his way toward the muddy gray building that housed them.
Before long, police officer Robert jogged back, and the carriage departed for Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
...
In the Evidence Room deep within the corridor on the first floor of the market district's police headquarters, Robert led Lumian to a wooden frame divided into multiple compartments and pointed to one of them.
"Here, Flameng's belongings."
Among the items, there was a dark suitcase, a fountain pen, paper, an ink bottle, and several large books crammed inside.
Lumian pulled out one of the books and quickly skimmed through its pages. He realized it was a mineralogy textbook focusing on Trier's underground rock formations. As an unschooled youth, the content proved challenging, with numerous unfamiliar words that

were exclusive to mineralogy.
The other books were also mineralogy texts, some containing basic teaching materials while others comprised complex collections of papers.
Confirming this, Lumian retrieved the suitcase, placed it on the floor, and opened it.
Inside, along with two sets of clothes and daily essentials, the suitcase was filled with small grayish-white cloth bags. Each bag had a different name written on it with a fountain pen:
Flower, Sedge, Sheep...
These are the names Flameng mentioned, referring to the various rock strata beneath Trier... *Could these bags contain corresponding mineral specimens?* Lumian briefly recollected Flameng's words and formed a rough idea of what the cloth bags contained.
Despite his madness, Flameng hadn't forgotten to bring along his research subjects!
But all of this held little significance for Lumian, and he began contemplating letting the police headquarters handle them.
Just then, Termiboros's magnificent voice resonated in his ears.
"The cloth bag on the far right."
Oh, so a loser like you is finally speaking up again? Lumian's initial reaction was to mock Termiboros. However, he turned his gaze toward the cloth bag hinted at by the Inevitability angel, feeling a mix of surprise and suspicion.
The cloth bag rested on the far right side of the suitcase, sandwiched between Flameng's socks and his razor. Dark blue ink formed a combination of terms on its surface:
"Earth Blood."
Earth... Blood... Lumian, crouching beside the suitcase, silently muttered as he calmly picked up the cloth bag in front of the police officer, Robert, and opened it.
Inside the bag was a brown rock pockmarked with potholes. Each depression contained dark-red speckles, resembling blood seeping from the earth.
For some reason, just looking at it filled Lumian with a sense of frustration.
He refrained from touching the mineral specimen with his bare hands. Instead, he securely tied the cloth bag and placed it back in the suitcase.
He swiftly skimmed through the book detailing the materials found in Trier's underground rock formations, searching for answers.
With a clear target in mind, he quickly discovered the answer.
"Earth Blood rock stratum lies between 55 and 56 meters

underground in Trier and has a thickness of approximately 0.76 meters... This is the deepest mineral we can gather. Beyond lies the forbidden Ancient Ruins Reserve..."

Beside this textbook description, Flameng's familiar handwriting jotted a few words:

"A small number of ores within the Earth Blood rock stratum are more peculiar than the others. They are suspected to contain volatile toxins that can induce irritability and lead to a mental illness known as mania.

"A researcher suddenly went berserk and slashed his colleague.

"To handle specific mineral specimens from the Earth Blood rock stratum, one must wear corresponding protective gear."

Earth Blood is a rock stratum near Fourth Epoch Trier? It's undeniably peculiar... No wonder Termiboros made me pay attention... As Lumian pondered, Robert urged, "Do you want them or not? Make a decision quickly!"

"Yes," Lumian responded, rising to his feet.

Even though he only desired the mineral specimen from the Earth Blood rock stratum and the mineralogy textbook detailing Trier's underground rocks, he signed and took possession of all of Flameng's belongings to avoid arousing suspicion.

Upon returning to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian neglected to wash off his enigmatic makeup. He whispered to Termiboros, "What makes this mineral specimen so special?"

Termiboros's voice echoed in Lumian's ears once more.

"Don't tell me you think it's normal for the Montsouris ghost to spare Flameng?"

Chapter 268: Possible Encounters

Upon hearing Termiboros's question, Lumian felt a jolt of alarm.

He had never suspected that there might be something amiss with Flameng's prolonged stay at Auberge du Coq Doré, evading the clutches of the Montsouris ghost.

From Lumian's perspective, Flameng's immediate family and wife had already met their demise, and it was only a matter of time before he met a similar fate. The archives at Psychic's headquarters revealed instances where victims had been slain by the Montsouris ghost up to 11 months after encountering it. While Flameng's circumstances were rare, they were not unprecedented.

In an instant, Lumian's mind seized upon an intriguing detail.

The previous victims had all met their end within the same year of their encounter, whereas Flameng had crossed paths with the ghost last year. He had even sought the sanctuary of the clergy during the New Year festivities.

Although less than a year had passed since Flameng's encounter with the Montsouris ghost and his subsequent suicide, it was an unprecedented delay compared to the other cases.

"Could this Earth Blood ore be responsible for protecting Flameng, causing the Montsouris ghost to repeatedly postpone its actions and disrupt its usual patterns?" Lumian asked Termiboros, his voice hushed, seeking confirmation.

Termiboros was a true angel, devoid of power due to a perfect seal but possessing remarkable insight, knowledge, and level made Him capable of deciphering many matters.

Termiboros replied in a majestic voice, "It instills fear and repulsion in the Montsouris ghost, but it holds no power of its own. For you, this could be a crucial key."

"A key?" Lumian swiftly made numerous connections. "The key to a hidden chamber in Fourth Epoch Trier?"

Termiboros responded in an unusually deep voice, "You will inevitably enter Fourth Epoch Trier. It is where your destiny, both treacherous and serendipitous, awaits you.

"Rather than remaining passive, it would be wiser to explore proactively, leveraging the insights gained from each venture to better prepare yourself."

"Aren't you revealing your intentions too quickly?" Lumian couldn't help but chuckle. "Are you trying to hasten my demise? So that you may utilize the unique underground environment to block the signal of the collapsing seal and ensure your own safe escape?"

Given that the Tree of Shadow hadn't taken root in Fourth Epoch Trier, Lumian held no interest in venturing underground.

Without awaiting Termiboros's response, he left the room and made his way to the nearest washroom, eager to wash off the mystical makeup that concealed his true identity.
Having eliminated the latent threat, Lumian settled at a wooden table and began to write.
It was clear that both Flameng and the Earth Blood ore were extraordinary cases. He couldn't simply follow Termiboros's directives; consulting Madam Magician was imperative.
If he lacked knowledge and blindly believed the words of an angel tied to an evil deity, he would inevitably suffer dire consequences, even risking his life.
Termiboros's voice resonated once more.
"Can you truly trust this Magician, this Tarot Club, as they claim?
"They sealed me within your body instead of seeking my eradication. I fear they have ulterior motives, intending to exploit you for their nefarious purposes."
"They cast you into Trier, the very heart of the storm, yet they displayed no concern nor made any inquiries about your well-being. Don't you find this suspicious? It cannot be explained away as mere training."
Lumian beamed and said with a sigh, "Have you never deceived or manipulated others in the past, relying solely on your status and abilities to achieve your goals?
"Would you like me to purchase a copy of the Art of Persuasion and read it aloud daily for your instruction?
"Allow me to enlighten you. Such tricks wouldn't have ensnared me during my early teenage years. I am well aware of those I can depend on, my true friends, my adversaries, and those I must remain wary of."
Termiboros fell silent, seemingly contemplating whether to acquire the art of rhetoric.
Lumian swiftly penned a letter to Madam Magician, detailing the recent developments, and entrusted it, along with the Earth Blood ore, to the puppet messenger he had summoned.
In due time, a reply arrived from Madam Magician, who returned the mineral specimen.
"I'm relieved to see that you remained cautious and didn't fully trust Termiboros's words.
"However, there is some truth to what He said. The ore lacks inherent power, but it carries remnants of unknown auras and characteristics, mostly dissipated. It won't aid you directly, but it seems destined to bring about encounters in the future, which could be either beneficial or detrimental. Its current state is highly chaotic, making it difficult to provide an accurate interpretation.

"What Termiboros intentionally misled you about is that the fortuitous encounter He spoke of might not necessarily occur in Fourth Epoch Trier, but somewhere underground.
"If, in the future, you wish to explore the potential encounters and are prepared to take risks, carry it with you whenever you venture into Underground Trier. Alternatively, if you wish to avoid the risk, keep it safely stored in your room.
"The symbolic elements I mentioned previously have already begun to unfold. A friend of mine mentioned that he possesses great proficiency in deciphering such matters. Once he completes his current tasks, I will arrange for you to meet him..."
Suddenly, a blaze erupted from Lumian's hand, reducing the letter to ashes.
Contemplating the words of both Madam Magician and Termiboros, Lumian couldn't help but believe that the Earth Blood ore before him could trigger some kind of mutation within Underground Trier. It could lead to a fortuitous encounter or even claim his life.
For now, it's best not to take unnecessary risks, Lumian thought, aware of his current strengths.
As a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac, he had overcome any deficiencies in both close-quarters combat and long-range attacks, excelling in hand-to-hand combat and spellcasting. He had surpassed the limitations of an ordinary individual. However, Hunters leaned more towards conventional battles and lacked the peculiar abilities and methods to deal with the peculiarities of Underground Trier.
Lumian decided to wait until he had fully digested the Pyromaniac potion and obtained the Contractee boon. Then, he would consider carrying the Earth Blood ore based on the information he had gathered about Underground Trier.
It would be even better if he could transform the Shadow Branch into a mystical item before that.
Suppressing his thoughts, Lumian took the mineral specimen to Rue des Blouses Blanches and concealed it in his safehouse.
Before the afternoon sun waned, he delved into Aurore's grimoire, meticulously studying its contents alongside Franca's teachings and his own experiences with fire spells, searching for any potential issues.
After more than an hour, Lumian stumbled upon a section about summoning creatures from the spirit world and forging contracts.
His mind immediately turned to White Paper, Aurore's contracted creature.
The fragile spirit entity possessed the ability to withstand a

specific ability of the contractor.
I wonder if the contract between Aurore and White Paper has been severed. According to the notebook, aside from the designated ritual, the contract can only be broken if one of the parties is completely deceased.
Regrettably, contracted creatures can only be summoned by the contractor and not by others like a messenger. Otherwise, I could utilize White Paper to determine if Aurore is truly deceased...
Hm... Is it possible that Aurore left behind any information with White Paper?
Lost in thought, Lumian's mind shifted to another matter that had previously escaped his notice.
Considering that Aurore occasionally gained clarity and assisted him in cutting up the livre bleu, reassembling letters, and seeking aid from the authorities, and since her initial response in the dream was to summon the messenger of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's Vice President, Hela, to seek her counsel, why didn't she occasionally summon the messenger when she was lucid and inform Madam Hela about her predicament?
In Madam Hela's earliest response to me, she clearly seemed unaware of the situation.
What prevented Aurore from making such an attempt?
Or could it be that she did summon a messenger, and Hela is concealing it?
Lumian narrowed his eyes. Without the accompanying memories, he couldn't discern the source of the problem.
For now, he wasn't overly suspicious of Hela, believing there must be another explanation.
It was worth noting that Hela's messenger knew Lumian's exact location. If the woman was truly entangled in Cordu's affairs and played a dishonorable role, she would undoubtedly wish to eliminate the final "survivor" without leaving any loose ends. Yet, all this time, she not only refrained from making any substantial moves but also kindly provided knowledge and suggestions.
For a moment, Lumian considered writing down his questions and sending them to Hela to gauge her response. However, he restrained himself, fearing that it might expose the king's new clothes and lead to unfavorable outcomes.
He decided to first have a conversation with Franca and gather opinions from her teammates in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and the Tarot Club regarding Hela's trustworthiness.
If Franca believed Hela to be reliable and had shared information about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society with her Major

Arcana card, Lumian would request Madam Magician to keep a watchful eye before sending inquiries to Hela.
He forced himself to regain composure and resumed studying Aurore's grimoire. Only when evening arrived did he leave Rue des Blouses Blanches, making his way onto Avenue du Marché and entering his Salle de Bal Brise.
"Good evening, Boss!" Greetings echoed from all directions as Lumian nodded in acknowledgement and led Louis and Sarkota to the second floor.
Before he could settle in at the café, René, the dance hall manager, approached him.
The slender middle-aged man pressed a hand to his chest and bowed respectfully.
"Monsieur Ciel, Monsieur Martin requests your presence at Rue des Fontaines tomorrow at 10 a.m."
Boss wants to see me? Lumian was both surprised and delighted.
He was taken aback that Gardner Martin had sent for him despite the recent lack of incidents. Yet, he couldn't help but feel a sense of joy at the prospect of further interaction with Gardner Martin and the opportunity to gain his trust to join the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

Chapter 269: Islander

"Alright." Lumian nodded at Manager René.

Lumian dabbed his mouth with a napkin and rose to his feet. He strolled towards one of the café's balconies, casting his eyes over the nocturnal scenery of Avenue du Marché.

The gas street lamps cast a soft, golden glow, illuminating the carriages and pedestrians that traversed the road.

At that moment, people streamed into Salle de Bal Brise one after another, joining the revelry within.

To be honest, Lumian preferred the cozy atmosphere of the basement bar at Auberge du Coq Doré to this place. It allowed him to unwind and find enjoyment.

From his perspective, the patrons of Salle de Bal Brise were excessively self-indulgent. They cared little for their families or their futures. All they sought was a night of revelry, drowning themselves in alcohol, beauty, dance, and uproar. In contrast, the regulars at the basement bar were mostly tenants of Auberge du Coq Doré. They would return around 9 or 10 p.m. and had to be in bed by 1 a.m. They drank, sang, boasted, and frolicked, making the most of those fleeting two to three hours to find their own slice of joy.

Only then did they gather the courage to face the arduous tasks of the following day and embrace the promise of a new dawn.

It was akin to kerosene lamps that required regular refueling to continue casting their light.

Lumian surveyed Avenue du Marché for a few minutes before his attention was abruptly drawn to a familiar figure.

There stood Charlie, adorned in a white shirt and blue waistcoat, embroiled in a street brawl, his formal coat casually slung over his arm.

Now we're talking... Lumian smiled, a touch of nostalgia and sentimentality washing over him as he used an expression that had recently gained popularity.

Pressing his right hand against the balcony, Lumian gracefully leaped from the second floor, landing nimbly at the edge of Avenue du Marché. With a few brisk strides, he reached the scene of Charlie's altercation.

He made no move to intervene or assist Charlie. Instead, he observed the fight with keen interest.

The other party engaged in this scuffle with Charlie was a slender young man in his mid-twenties, possessed of dark skin and sunken eyes. His lips were thick, and his slightly curly black hair marked him as a descendant of the Fog Sea Islander lineage.

However, compared to his fellow islanders, he appeared somewhat more presentable.
"Cheat! You damn cheat!" Charlie spat out, his curses interwoven with their tussle.
The Islander, donning a blue shirt with a fountain pen tucked in his breast pocket, deftly dodged Charlie's onslaught while offering an explanation.
"I didn't want this to happen either. I, too, fell victim to deceit!"
"Dogsh*t!" Charlie's kick missed its mark.
The two engaged in their amateurish scuffle until their breath grew ragged. Simultaneously, they slowed their movements and eventually ceased their struggle.
Only then did Charlie notice Lumian standing beside him, observing the brawl with a smile.
"Ciel, it's Monette! That swindler! The one who conned me out of 10 verl d'or, nearly leaving me to starve!" Charlie's face lit up as he eagerly revealed the identity of his Islander adversary. "Praise the Sun for granting me this encounter!"
The Islander whom Charlie deemed deserving of a dire fate... Lumian chuckled to himself.
"You're partly to blame as well. Haven't you heard the saying? 'Never trust an Islander.'"
"I thought we were friends," Charlie muttered, his frustration evident.
How could you be so naïve and easily swayed? You too possess a certain knack for mischief... People like you can be easily ensnared by scheming individuals, falling into their traps without gaining either the affection or the riches you desire. Ah, you've already fallen victim... Lumian chastised, shifting his gaze towards the Islander named Monette.
Monette responded with an obsequious smile.
"I genuinely intended to help Charlie find employment, but I, too, fell prey to a scam and lost all my money.
"I couldn't face Charlie, so I secretly departed from Auberge du Coq Doré."
As he spoke, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a stack of banknotes, counting three 5 verl d'or bills. He handed them over to Charlie.
"I returned to the market district to find you and return your money, along with interest."
Charlie's emotions eased considerably as he verified the authenticity of the three banknotes under the glow of the street lamps. He asked, still somewhat suspicious, "Are you someone who gets scammed easily?"

Ever since Charlie had encountered Monette until his departure, he had only witnessed him conning others. He had never seen him on the receiving end of such deals. True to his Islander identity.
Monette sheepishly smiled and replied, "Not only was I swindled once, but I fell for it a second time.
"The first instance, I encountered a group of people who claimed that Salle de Bal Unique in Quartier de l'Observatoire wanted to expand and were offering shares for sale. Each lot cost a mere 200 verl d'or.
"You all know how lucrative the dance hall is. I couldn't resist dipping into my savings, but the share subscription certificate I received turned out to be counterfeit!
"I confronted them, only to be swindled once more."
Salle de Bal Unique... Lumian's eyelids twitched involuntarily.
The bankrupt merchant, Fitz, residing in Room 401 of Auberge du Coq Doré, had previously been duped out of 100,000 verl d'or by the owner of Salle de Bal Unique, Timmons. Fitz had sought Lumian's aid in recovering the sum, but Lumian had investigated and consulted several sources. He found the dance hall's practices dubious, possessing a formidable network. They appeared to wield considerable power, causing Lumian to abandon the commission.
Now, he had encountered another victim of Salle de Bal Unique.
"You were swindled by them once before. How did you fall for it a second time?" Charlie couldn't fathom such foolishness.
Monette cleared his throat twice.
"They openly confessed to being a group of swindlers and refused to return the money. They even said that reporting them to the authorities would be futile. Impressed by my skills, they asked if I was willing to learn the art of deception from them, allowing me to recoup my losses.
"In the end, they merely taught me what I already knew. They only gave me something else."
"What was it?" Charlie was always a curious one.
In the blink of an eye, Monette retrieved a transparent monocle from his pocket.
He smoothly placed it into his right eye socket.
For some reason, Lumian sensed an inexplicable change in Monette as soon as he wore the monocle. It was as if he had transformed into a different character altogether.
The corners of Monette's mouth curled slightly as he positioned the monocle over his right eye. He glanced at Charlie first, then turned his gaze towards Lumian. His eyes shifted from Lumian's face to his chest and hands.
Lumian felt a subtle unease, but he detected no immediate danger.

Monette smiled and said, "Are you Ciel, the mastermind behind the Idiot Instrument?"
"Yes." Lumian did not deny it and remained silently cautious.
Monette adjusted the monocle on his right eye.
"Quite adept at pulling pranks, I must say.
"Would you like this monocle? It's of no use to me. I could exchange it for some cash. With it, you can disguise yourself as a member of Salle de Bal Unique and earn a good amount of money there."
Do I look like a fool to you? Lumian promptly rejected Monette's suggestion without hesitation.
"I have no interest in donning monocles."
He had always been skeptical of the peculiar rules of Salle de Bal Unique, keeping his guard up.
Disappointed, Monette redirected his gaze, removed the monocle, and turned to Charlie.
"I've given you the money and the interest. If you ever need anything in the future, come find me at Salle de Bal Unique."
Charlie scoffed dismissively.
He still harbored suspicions that Monette had intended to scam him in the past.
After the Islander left Avenue du Marché, Lumian turned to Charlie.
"Remember to keep your distance from that fellow. Otherwise, you might end up encountering the same situation with Susanna Mattise."
The latter part of his statement was a fabrication, primarily to instill fear in Charlie and ensure he took the advice seriously.
Charlie was instantly alarmed. Without questioning further, he hastily nodded and replied, "Alright, alright!"
...
At midnight, Lumian and Jenna, the latter wearing a sparkling red dress, exited Salle de Bal Brise and made their way towards Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Jenna did not inquire about the reason for their route. After a moment of silence, she spoke up.
"Have you ever felt like nothing matters? Lost and devoid of motivation?"
"Definitely," Lumian replied casually, his gaze fixed on the street ahead. "In such moments, you must rediscover the meaning of life and determine what truly matters to you."
Jenna fell silent once more. After a while, she asked, "Have you ever experienced something akin to an illusion shattering within you? A mysterious cosmos materializing, adorned with stars of

varying sizes?"
"No," Lumian replied after a brief pause.
He had experienced the sensation of illusory objects abruptly disintegrating. It occurred every time the potion was completely digested. However, he knew nothing of the mysterious cosmos or the glimmering stars of different magnitudes.
Jenna remained silent, deep in thought about the implications of this phenomenon or contemplating other matters.
Soon enough, they arrived at Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Franca was already back and regarded them warily as they entered side by side.
Before she could inquire, Jenna brought up the topic of the shattered illusions and the appearance of the mysterious cosmos.
Franca was taken aback but spoke joyfully, "Your Assassin potion has been fully digested! Assassinating a parliament member in public and under heavy security certainly facilitated the digestion process."
Is this a sign of potion digestion? Lumian couldn't hide his surprise and perplexity.
Why do I experience only the first half and not the second?
Franca scrutinized him suspiciously.
"You've never experienced it before? How did you advance then?"
Not only is the seal on me restraining Termiboros, but it also restricts some of my mystical senses? That's right. The seal resides within me. It's impossible for it to have zero impact... Lumian formed a vague hypothesis and casually brushed it off.
"It wasn't as pronounced."
Franca, more concerned about her female companion, did not press the matter further and curiously asked Jenna, "So, have you managed to summarize the principles of acting?"
"Acting principles?" Jenna pondered for a moment. "After the assassination, I learned many principles. Yes, assassination is a matter of risking one's life. It is the ultimate form of punishment, a calamity for those criminals..."
Enthusiastically delving into the "acting method" and discussing acting principles with Jenna, Franca suddenly remembered Lumian's presence.
"What—what's the matter?" She glanced at her male companion, who had settled onto the sofa.
Lumian met her gaze and indicated that they needed to speak privately.
Jenna instantly understood, excused herself to change clothes, and retreated into the guest bedroom.

Lumian lowered his voice and addressed Franca, "What do you make of Hela? What kind of person do you think she is?"

Chapter 270: Agreement

"Madame Hela? How do you know her?" Franca's immediate reaction was one of surprise and astonishment.

She quickly remembered that Lumian's sister, Muggle, was also a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. She hastily added, "Did your sister mention Madame Hela to you?"

Lumian nodded.

"Not only did she mention her, but she also gave me the incantation to summon Madame Hela's messenger."

"Did she suggest seeking help from Madame Hela when you faced trouble?" Franca speculated. "Are you planning to summon Madame Hela's messenger and ask if she can be trusted?"

"Sort of," Lumian affirmed. "I've already established a connection with Madame Hela and summoned her messenger, but today I realized that some of my sister's actions during the disaster in Cordu were unusual. It seems to be connected to Madame Hela. I don't know if I should question her directly."

Observing that Lumian hadn't provided further details about the disaster in Cordu or Aurore's abnormal behavior, Franca understood why and refrained from prying. She pondered and replied,

"Personally, I trust Madame Hela. Dammit, you've established a connection with her without even telling me!

"Well... She's one of the most advanced members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society on the paths of the divine. There are suspicions that she belongs to the Corpse Collector pathway."

"Not only does she willingly share her knowledge and experience with us, but she also offers assistance whenever possible. The items she trades are only slightly more expensive than their cost price."

"To many of us, including your sister and me, Madame Hela is like a dependable older sister. She has rescued us from helplessness, anxiety, and indecision. We trust her implicitly."

"Understood," Lumian sighed with relief. "I'll have an honest conversation with Madame Hela to uncover the true cause of the problem."

At this point, he changed the subject.

"Does your Major Arcana card know about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society?"

"I haven't mentioned it to her directly. All I said was that I joined a secret organization that provides mutual assistance. However, she seems to be aware of the Research Society's situation," Franca lowered her voice unconsciously. "I suspect I'm not the only

member of the Tarot Club in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society."
With his lingering doubts cleared, Lumian turned around, smiling, and waved his hand.
"I'm going to summon Madame Hela's messenger."
"Hey, it's still early. Want to play Fighting Evil for a couple of hours before heading back?" Franca, who wasn't fond of going to bed early, tried to find some entertainment.
Lumian rejected her without hesitation.
When he returned to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian didn't rush to summon Hela's messenger. Instead, he unfolded a piece of paper and wrote to Madam Magician once again.
He briefly mentioned the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and informed the demigod that Aurore was willing to seek help anonymously from the authorities when she was lucid. However, she hadn't summoned Hela's messenger for advice, which didn't align with her behavior in Lumian's dream. He didn't know if Aurore was under another restriction or if there was an issue with Hela.
Before long, Madam Magician replied with a simple line: "Based on the information we have, Hela is trustworthy."
Phew... Lumian relaxed and began writing a letter to Madame Hela.
In the letter, he candidly pointed out Aurore's abnormality and asked if she had missed receiving any letters.
Skilled in the process, Lumian made slight adjustments to the altar and changed the ingredients. He swiftly summoned a human skull that appeared to be made of pure silver.
As he gazed at the pale-white flames silently burning in the skull's eye sockets, Pyromaniac Lumian felt a greater sense of danger emanating from it than ever before.
It was no less intense than the feeling he got from Madam Magician's puppet messenger!
The pure silver skull clamped onto the letter and vanished into the dense darkness around it.
Lumian didn't rush to tidy up the altar. He patiently waited.
As time ticked by, a letter suddenly materialized on the wooden table in front of him, and he hadn't sensed its arrival until the end.
Of course, this was a significant improvement from before. Previously, he only noticed it after the pure silver skull had placed the letter.
Lumian unfolded the letter and swiftly scanned it under the glow of the two yellow candles on the altar.

"I haven't received any letters from Muggle since February of this year.
"I understand that a one-sided story lacks credibility, but if you carefully consider it, you should find some details that support this matter.
"I suspect that some force had influenced Muggle, causing her to refrain from seeking help from me for some reason. In fact, if she had written to me before the catastrophe completely unfolded, I could have arrived earlier than the official Beyonders. I might have been able to save Muggle and prevent the catastrophe.
"Often, letters and exchanges fail to inspire insights, making it difficult for us to engage in broader and more profound discussions. I will be in Trier in the coming days. If you are willing, we can arrange a time and place to meet and discuss your sister's encounter and the disaster in Cordu in detail. Perhaps, then, I can offer you useful suggestions."
Lumian pondered for a few seconds before recalling a detail from his dream.
Aurore had attempted to summon Hela's messenger but ultimately refrained from doing so. She was afraid of triggering a loop that would cause Cordu to restart frequently.
This likely meant that she had given up summoning Hela's messenger in reality or that she had tried but failed for some reason.
After realizing this, Lumian replied to Hela's suggestion, "No problem. We'll arrange a time and place when you arrive in Trier."
After sending the letter, concluding the ritual, and tidying up the altar, Lumian realized it was getting late. He quickly washed up, lay on the bed, and drifted off to sleep.
The following morning, Lumian awoke naturally to the resonating sound of the cathedral bell.
After visiting the washroom, he embarked on his usual morning jog along familiar streets like Rue Anarchie and Avenue du Marché, fully energizing his body.
During his routine, he discovered an empty space in the square outside Église Saint-Robert and spent nearly an hour practicing combat techniques.
Returning to Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian enjoyed a meatloaf breakfast while sipping a Whiskey Sour. On his way, he passed the Suhit steam locomotive station, where new vendors were already selling photos of street maîtresse d'ateliers.
Lumian scanned the scene and caught sight of Baron Brignais.
The Savoie Mob leader, adorned with a diamond ring and smoking a mahogany pipe, appeared gentlemanly with his half top hat and

the absence of any accompanying thugs.
Holding a seven- or eight-year-old child, he made his way from the steam locomotive station towards a carriage parked by the roadside.
The child donned a caramel coat with brass buttons, a black-and-white checkered shirt, and a linen coat. His black strapless leather shoes and white socks paired with a dark-red school bag that appeared somewhat heavy and solid.
With yellow hair, brown eyes, and a sturdy physique, the child had noticeable baby fat on his face and exuded an air of simplicity and honesty.
Baron Brignais's child? He usually resides in other provinces and visits Trier for summer vacations? No wonder they don't seem too familiar... Lumian muttered to himself, redirecting his gaze and continuing his stroll.
...
11 Rue des Fontaines, within Gardner Martin's grayish-white three-story villa.
Lumian arrived in the exclusive carriage of Salle de Bal Brise. He passed through the hall adorned with weapons and armor, arriving at a room filled with bookshelves.
Gardner Martin, displaying his amiable disposition, deep facial features, and brownish-red eyes, sat in an armchair at the back of the study. Standing before him were the short "Rat" Christo, with his gray-black hair, dark-blue eyes, and mustache, and the towering "Giant" Simon, measuring over 1.9 meters, his light-yellow hair closely cropped, clad in an unusually tight black suit.
Sensing Lumian's entrance into the study, "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo turned to regard their colleague.
"Giant" Simon's eyes displayed caution and defiance as he instinctively raised his head.
He believed that Ciel, who had defeated "Hammer" Ait, shouldn't be underestimated. However, he also believed that he himself was unquestionably stronger than that fool and might not lose to Ciel.
"Rat" Christo showed no evident emotions, but the right pocket of his dark brown shirt suddenly stirred, as if something alive resided within.
Christo slipped his right hand into his pocket, his expression abruptly changing.
His gaze upon Lumian grew intense with fear, and he couldn't help but smile obsequiously.
Wh... Lumian felt a tad uneasy.
After pondering for a moment, he suspected that "Rat" Christo had used an item in his pocket to "see" that Lumian had advanced to

Sequence 7 and become a Pyromaniac.
In contrast, "Giant" Simon clearly lacked such intuition, failing to notice the subtle shifts in his colleague.
"Good morning, Boss," Lumian energetically greeted Gardner Martin.
A few days ago, he had informed the boss of the Savoie Mob that he had consumed the potion and advanced to Pyromaniac.
Gardner Martin nodded slightly, shifting his gaze from Lumian's face to "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon.
After nearly ten seconds, he spoke in a low voice, "I have a mission for all of you. At precisely noon, retrieve something from Underground Trier and bring it to Rue des Fontaines."
Mission? Lumian's eyebrows twitched, sensing a potential trap.
As a new Beyonder to the Savoie Mob, trust between him and Gardner Martin was still lacking. Why would he be assigned such a crucial and confidential task?
With these thoughts racing through his mind, Lumian had two conjectures: either he was mere cannon fodder or this was a test.

Chapter 271: Acting

With this in mind, Lumian's gaze automatically drifted over "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon, taking them in.

He sensed that the chances of them becoming expendable pawns were slim. Potion-consuming Beyonders, unlike the Blessed relying on divine favors from evil gods, were a rarity. They couldn't be simply stockpiled at will. Firstly, the ingredients required were specific, and secondly, ample time was needed. At the Mid-Sequence, luck and mastery of the acting method played a role.

If he were to use them as mere pawns in this mission, the likelihood of reclaiming the Beyonder characteristics would be greatly diminished. It constituted a substantial portion of Gardner Martin's control over the underground world in the market district.

As a member of the secretive organization, the Iron and Blood Cross Order, Gardner Martin could indeed bear such a loss, but he wouldn't make such a colossal sacrifice for something insignificant.

And if the mission was of sufficient importance, sending only one Sequence 7 and two Sequence 8 Beyonders was clearly inadequate. Shouldn't Gardner Martin be concerned about failure?

With this realization, Lumian swiftly revised his conjecture.

Either this was a preliminary test, a low-risk mission designed to assess him, regardless of whether "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon were aware of it, or it was indeed a crucial and perilous operation. While using them as pawns, there would be powerhouses present as a safety net. This was also a test.

With this in mind, Lumian's initial reaction was to gaze at Gardner Martin and accept the mission, projecting an image of an ambitious young man striving to climb the ranks.

If it was the first possibility, this was his best chance to prove himself. If it was the second possibility, Lumian still had Mr. K's finger quietly nestled in his pocket as a trump card. When the time came, if he needed to divulge his affiliation with the Aurora Order to ensure his survival, he could abandon the Iron and Blood Cross Order's mission.

As long as he remained alive, he could await another opportunity!

After the catastrophe caused by the Tree of Shadow, Lumian visited Psychic's headquarters and met Mr. K before Gardner Martin could conduct an investigation.

He concealed his experience with the Tree of Shadow, merely mentioning that something had occurred in the market district, trapping them in a peculiar wilderness. Then the brownish-green

tree descended, and Susanna Mattise appeared, draining everyone's energy. To combat the Fallen Tree Spirit, he used the finger to fashion a robust defensive flesh robe, but he didn't receive additional assistance.
Later, with the aid of the tree's further descent, Susanna Mattise's weakened state, and the involvement of the other two present Beyonders, he barely overcame the enemy and vanquished her using his Pyromaniac abilities and the Fallen Mercury from Cordu.
He spoke the truth, albeit blurring the sequence of events, time, and location, as well as omitting a few details. The logic remained intact. Mr. K harbored no suspicions after hearing the account; instead, he sighed and cautioned Lumian not to overly rely on the finger since there were multiple ways to sever the mystical connection between him and it.
Satisfied with Lumian's advancement to Pyromaniac with Gardner Martin's assistance, Mr. K plucked another finger for him.
This led Lumian to believe that, as long as he didn't encounter extraordinary environments like Paramita or the Tree of Shadow and wasn't entangled in the perilous affair of confronting a godlike entity head-on, with Mr. K's finger, even if he couldn't completely reverse the situation, he still had a high chance of escape.
Just as Lumian was about to express his stance to the boss, he suddenly sensed that he shouldn't push his acting too far.
That was what Jenna would occasionally say.
According to Franca, Boss is at least a Sequence 6 Conspirer. I can't underestimate his intelligence and discernment...
My background is undeniably evident. I'm young and hail from the countryside. I was once entangled in a Beyonder catastrophe and lacked knowledge. I wanted to change my fate, but I've spent a considerable time in the market district, openly and covertly accomplishing much. Even with what the Boss only knows, it should be enough for him to perceive that I'm not an ignorant country bumpkin who acts rashly and mercilessly.
Based on today's incident, the impression the boss has of me should be someone capable of detecting mission abnormalities and potential dangers. Simply agreeing without reason or observation would only raise suspicions of ulterior motives or reliance on something.
That would be troublesome...
A whirlwind of thoughts raced through Lumian's mind. He immediately shifted his gaze to "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo, eagerly awaiting their reactions and attitudes toward the mission.
It remained unclear whether "Rat" Christo was recalling the

incident involving the "mirror person" or his brother's demise due to it. His expression grew nasty, tainted with fear and apprehension.
Doubt and wariness flickered across "Giant" Simon's face, yet he didn't voice any objections.
After a few seconds, they nearly spoke simultaneously.
"Yes, Boss!"
Observing this, Lumian deliberately hesitated before continuing, "Yes, Boss!"
With keen eyes, Gardner Martin observed Lumian, Christo, and Simon, assessing their expressions and demeanors.
After their unanimous agreement, the boss of the Savoie Mob grinned with satisfaction and said, "I shall now disclose the mission details."
He reached into a drawer and retrieved a scroll made of faux goatskin, laying it out on the desk before them.
Approaching, Lumian and his companions beheld a map revealing a section of Underground Trier!
The map measured a meter in length and 50 centimeters in width. The upper level depicted the Underground Trier, formed by the municipal department through the excavation of various tunnels and reinforcement of the quarry cave. It corresponded to the streets and squares above ground.
The map focused solely on the underground areas of Quartier du Marché, Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, Quartier du Jardin Botanique, and Quartier de l'Observatoire. However, it was intricately detailed, as if copied from the original by infiltrating the municipal department.
Lumian could clearly discern extensions on both sides, although the drawing did not continue.
In the middle of the map lay quarry caves, ancient catacombs, and underground river tributaries, scattered in a haphazard manner and connected to the upper level through visible or concealed tunnels.
This portion contained numerous gaps and omissions. Beside these areas were inscriptions such as "to be investigated," "to be explored," and "to be searched."
The lower levels of the map encompassed collapsed mines and more missing information, as if veiled in a shroud of fog. Even the Iron and Blood Cross Order, a secret organization, lacked comprehensive knowledge.
Numerous passageways extended downward from this level, but the map did not indicate their connections.
Fourth Epoch Trier? The place referred to as the Ancient Ruins

Reserve by the authorities?
It's evident that this map is a copy of a more comprehensive one...
A complete version includes Fourth Epoch Trier?
The Iron and Blood Cross Order possesses extensive knowledge of the underground... Lumian speculated as he committed the incomplete map to memory.
After his three subordinates had taken a cursory glance at the map, Gardner Martin pointed to a location and said, "This is your destination."
It marked a collapsed mine, yet there remained some open space.
Situated at the lowest level of the map, it was near Fourth Epoch Trier.
Above it, corresponding to Avenue Sèlbù, Rue des Mauvais Enfants, and Place de la Forêt, lay the intersection between Quartier de l'Observatoire and Quartier du Jardin Botanique.
"It's called the Albert Mines," Gardner Martin introduced. "To reach it, you must traverse two privately-bored tunnels. It remains unknown to the authorities and most people who travel underground."
As he spoke, Gardner Martin traced the tunnel with his finger and instructed Lumian, Christo, and Simon on the correct entrance.
Finally, he sighed with a tinge of emotion and added, "Six years ago, Albert Goncourt, the leader of the rebellion and the mastermind behind the uprising, relied on this mine, which he discovered and named, to elude the army, police, and official Beyonders who were searching the underground. He survived."
Six years ago... Rebellion... Uprising... Lumian instantly recalled what he had witnessed and heard.
During the war with the Loen Kingdom, prices in Trier skyrocketed, leaving people in despair due to the exorbitant cost of food. This triggered a massive protest that swept through the city, resulting in various conflicts.
From Gardner Martin's words, it was evident that the protest wasn't purely spontaneous. Someone had planned and guided it. Was the Iron and Blood Cross Order also involved? Lumian continued to gaze at the map, lost in thought.
Concluding his explanation, Gardner Martin said, "Your task is to reach the Albert Mines before noon and await the arrival of a trader who will hand you a box.
"You need not give him anything, nor do you need to communicate with him verbally.
"On your return journey, you must not open that box, as doing so would expose you to immeasurable danger.
"As long as you strictly follow my instructions, the mission poses

minimal risk. While you may encounter peculiar phenomena concealed underground or face Beyonder monsters, good teamwork will resolve those challenges."
After providing them with additional guidance, Lumian, Christo, and Simon each took a carbide lamp and departed from 11 Rue des Fontaines, making their way to the nearest entrance to Underground Trier.
Casting a final glance at the now-out-of-sight grayish-white villa, Lumian considered the impression Gardner Martin had of him.
With a smile, he casually inquired of "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon, "Have you undertaken similar missions before?"
"Rat" Christo fell silent for a few seconds before answering, "Thrice."
"Once," "Giant" Simon replied in a slightly buzzing voice.
Lumian chuckled.
"Well, the fact that you're still alive suggests that such missions aren't too perilous."
"Rat" Christo remained silent, as though he had fallen into a grim recollection. "Giant" Simon reassured himself, echoing Lumian's words.
"You're right. Perhaps this is a test from the boss. Those who pass may have an opportunity to advance further."
Lumian smiled.
"And what about those who fail? Do they perish on the spot?"

Chapter 272: Charismatic Artist

"Giant" Simon found himself momentarily speechless, struggling to find the right words. After a few seconds of contemplation, he finally spoke up.

"Are you out of your mind? If you fail, the worst outcome would be missing an opportunity."

"Rat" Christo chimed in.

"If the mission is truly important, the Boss wouldn't hesitate to handle it personally. He wouldn't send us. And if it's not a significant task, the risk won't be too high."

This train of thought mirrored Lumian's initial concerns.

Lumian glanced towards the nearby entrance of Underground Trier, intentionally wearing a smile.

"Perhaps we are merely bait in this scenario?

"For instance, the Boss suspects that a faction is secretly watching us, so he has deliberately devised this mission. If everything goes smoothly without any abnormalities, he can deactivate the alarm and consider it a test. However, if he does catch something, he can follow the trail of clues to uncover the truth and eliminate any hidden dangers. As for us being the bait and potentially getting caught, it's not his concern. As long as we ultimately achieve his goal, losing a few Low-Sequence Beyonders falls within his level of tolerance."

"Rat" Christo's face turned pale upon hearing these words, while "Giant" Simon fell into silence.

Although they lacked experience with mysticism, their years as mobsters and leaders had honed their basic analytical skills.

They couldn't help but admit that Ciel's theory made sense.

This, naturally, brought about a deep sense of fear for their lives.

Especially for Christo, memories of his brother Erkin's death and the pained expressions of his wife and children flooded his mind.

If it weren't for the Boss assigning him another task and excluding him from the smuggling operation, he might have been replaced by the so-called "mirror people" and met a tragic end somewhere underground.

And as for his wife, his dogs, and the other animals he cared for, the "mirror person" would have had the opportunity to enjoy them for a while!

With these thoughts weighing on their minds, the three of them ignited their carbide lamps and descended the steel stairs in silence.

Christo scanned the dark tunnel with the bluish-yellow light, his voice trembling as he spoke.

"The Boss wouldn't purposefully send us to our deaths.
"Even as Low-Sequence Beyonders, we still have our uses. If we perish underground, it might take the Boss half a year or even a whole year to groom a replacement."
The "mirror people" incident came to his mind, the Boss's request for him to undertake a different task being a clear attempt to protect him without revealing anything.
"Everything comes at a price. Perhaps the stakes involved this time are more valuable than the three of us combined." Lumian held the carbide lamp emitting a yellowish glow, walking steadily through the dark and slightly damp passageway. He sneered and said, "I hope this mission won't be as perilous as the Boss claims, but we can't afford to be naive. We must prepare for the worst."
Noting Ciel's significant improvement, Christo couldn't help but ask, "What should we do?"
From his perspective, Ciel was the most reliable person in this mission—a lifeline in critical moments.
Surprised by Christo's sudden timidity, "Giant" Simon turned towards him.
When did the "Rat" become so fearful?
As a leader under the Boss, why would he choose to display weakness and worry in front of Ciel?
Where is his pride and self-esteem? Wasn't he afraid that Ciel would overshadow him and encroach upon his smuggling business?
This was precisely the effect Lumian intended. He genuinely spoke up.
"The Boss has helped me multiple times, and I'm more than willing to carry out missions for him. However, the risk involved should not be excessively high, leaving us with only the option of 'death.' Damn it, I haven't lived long enough!
"That's why my stance is to attempt the mission if possible. If it becomes too dangerous, I won't hesitate to abandon it and ensure my own survival. This might require the three of us to let down our guard against each other and cooperate fully to overcome any hidden threats."
Such an attitude struck a chord with Christo and Simon, prompting visible or imperceptible nods from them.
No one was entirely selfless. Taking a calculated risk for the Boss was already a testament to their loyalty!
Accepting this attitude and genuinely cooperating to resist danger seemed to be the only viable choice, at least on the surface.
"How should we collaborate?" Christo swiftly made up his mind.
He didn't want another "mirror people" incident.

Lumian smirked once more.
"First and foremost, we must understand each other's abilities so that we can complement one another more effectively."
Christo pondered for a moment before speaking up, "I'm a Beast Tamer, a Sequence 8 of the Apothecary pathway. I can directly confront and communicate with various beasts to a certain extent. I have the ability to gradually tame them and make them my assistants.
"I'm also skilled in treating illnesses and providing comprehensive medical care..."
At that moment, he couldn't help but cast a questioning glance at Ciel, as if hinting at his need for a remedy to improve his performance in bed and replenish his physical stamina.
Word had gotten around about Ciel being quite a libertine. Not only was he involved with Jenna, "Red Boots'" mistress, but he had also been linked to nearly ten dancers. He had arranged for them to receive acting lessons at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, allowing them to earn money without having to accompany customers.
An Apothecary? If only I had known that "Rat" Christo was an Apothecary, I would've gotten him to give plenty of medicine to Jenna's mother... She would've made a quick recovery and returned home that very night... Lumian silently sighed and nodded approvingly in the flickering light of the carbide lamp.
The more "Giant" Simon listened, the more astonished he became.
He began to suspect that "Rat" Christo had lost his mind by divulging the secrets of his Sequence!
Until now, apart from Gardner Martin, nobody knew Christo's Sequence or the pathway he belonged to. After all, there were plenty of people in Trier who had a fondness for pets—some even had a large number of them or formed intimate relationships with animals, as occasionally seen in the newspapers.
In a flash, an idea struck Simon.
"Rat" Christo was in charge of the smuggling business and had completed most of the Boss's secret missions. Perhaps he knew something and had become pessimistic about this operation, hence his sincere cooperation with Ciel.
Christo let out a sigh and continued, "I've been unlucky. I haven't managed to tame a genuine Beyonder creature yet. Otherwise, I wouldn't be powerless against Mid-Sequence Beyonders even if I encountered them.
"This mission was sudden and we didn't have time to prepare. I only brought a few companions with me. Is he afraid that we won't die quickly enough?"

As he spoke, he raised his right hand.
A colorful snake-like creature with a triangular head emerged from his sleeve.
Soon after, Christo had the snake retreat back into his sleeve. He reached into his pocket and produced a palm-sized rat.
This rat was different from the ordinary kind. Its fur was pale white and distinct, with eyes as bright as rubies.
"This is Taffy. It's a unique creature I discovered underground during my smuggling days. It can't be used as the main ingredient for any potion, but it has the ability to sense hidden dangers," Christo briefly introduced.
"It can also sense the approximate strength of others, right?" Lumian asked thoughtfully.
Christo looked at Lumian with surprise and hesitated for a moment before replying, "Yes."
Recognizing that Christo had already divulged enough information, Lumian didn't press further, despite suspecting that he possessed other abilities or other animal companions. Instead, he shifted his gaze to "Giant" Simon.
Simon hesitated for a moment, recalling his earlier speculation. In a muffled voice, he said, "I'm a Sequence 8 Pugilist of the Warrior pathway. Like 'Hammer' Ait, I excel in face-to-face combat and various fighting techniques. I carry a gun, a dagger, a bayonet, and boxing gloves."
His explanation was brief, as Pugilists didn't possess any extraordinary abilities.
No mystical item? That's true. It's indeed challenging for mobsters groomed by secret organizations to acquire such items... Lumian chuckled to himself.
"You're stronger than 'Hammer' Ait because you're intelligent and can read the situation clearly."
These words left Simon unsure whether to feel angered or proud.
Holding the carbide lamp, he looked at Lumian and said, "What about you? Which Sequence 8 pathway are you from? Hunter?"
Since they were working together, Ciel couldn't keep his Sequence a secret!
Lumian smiled, raising his right hand in front of him.
Silently, a crimson flame emerged from his palm and hung in the air, burning silently.
"You're a Pyromaniac?" Simon exclaimed in surprise.
Among Trier's mystical circles, the most common information concerned Mid-Sequence Beyonders of the Hunter pathway, especially those below Sequence 6.
Lumian didn't respond, opting to maintain his smile instead.

Simon suddenly understood why "Rat" Christo's attitude towards Ciel had undergone such a drastic change and why he appeared to seek his assistance.
Sequence 7 was the starting point for Mid-Sequence Beyonders. Compared to Low-Sequence Beyonders like themselves, their strength had undergone a qualitative transformation. They were countless times more powerful!
With his attention now diverted from the pocket of "Rat" Christo, Simon asked Lumian in surprise and suspicion, "Does the Boss know that you've advanced to Sequence 7?"
"The Boss provided me with the necessary supplementary ingredients," Lumian truthfully replied, dissipating the crimson flame in his palm under the yellowish glow of the lamp.
Wha... Simon's pupils dilated.
Lumian looked around and continued, "That's why, if I can complete this mission, I will do everything in my power to see it through."
With those words, he pulled out an iron-colored canister and tossed it to Simon.
"This is Scorpion Poison that I obtained from 'Hammer' Ait. You can apply it to your weapon.
"Increasing your strength will increase our chances of survival."
Simon caught the canister, momentarily taken aback.
Though Ciel disgusted him and they were at odds, his knowledge, intelligence, strength, and approach to things made him seem reliable. Unconsciously, he found himself listening to him and following his lead.
Lumian, who was walking ahead without turning back, let out a sigh of relief.
He had exaggerated the risks and instilled fear to dampen the spirits of "Rat" Christo and Simon, plunging them into a state of worry. Then, by revealing his own strength, offering convincing suggestions, and providing small favors, he would establish himself as the team's leader.
Only then could he fully harness the team's combined strength without exposing his hidden trump cards and effectively combat any potential threats.

Chapter 273: Trader

Holding the carbide lamp aloft, "Giant" Simon trailed behind Lumian for a few steps, his keen eyes picking up on the inconsistencies in Lumian's words.

"Ciel, the Boss knows you've turned into a Pyromaniac. He won't just toss you aside recklessly, will he?"

Lumian gazed ahead at the tunnel bathed in the yellowish glow, a smile playing on his lips as he posed a question without turning around.

"How long have I been with the Savoie Mob?"

Both "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo had a moment of enlightenment and found themselves in agreement with Lumian's explanation.

It was true that Lumian, a Beyonder with a dubious past who had recently joined the mob, had brought with him a crucial ingredient for a potion. Such a person couldn't be trusted right off the bat. They had to undergo a series of tests in the form of missions.

And if Lumian were to meet his demise during one of these missions, it would simply be chalked up to his ill luck. Losing a foreign Beyonder was far less painful for the Boss than losing a subordinate he had meticulously groomed.

The two leaders of the Savoie Mob hesitated no longer. They cautiously followed Lumian, maintaining a distance of two to three steps. It was a familiar arrangement, much like when they traveled with a few mobsters stationed at similar positions behind them.

In the midst of their journey, "Giant" Simon donned gloves and applied a small amount of Scorpion Poison to his dagger, bayonet, and boxing gloves. He then returned the canister to Lumian.

The trio descended into the tunnel marked on the map. Despite their soft steps, the special environment caused their footfalls to echo faintly in the dark, eerily silent underground.

Nearly 45 minutes later, they passed through the area marked as an ancient tomb and arrived at the entrance of a concealed passageway.

It led to an abandoned quarry cave that had lain dormant for ages. The ground was uneven, covered in moss. In the distance, the sound of an underground river could be heard, occasionally accompanied by the rumbling of a steam subway passing by.

Lumian observed for a moment, clenching the ring of the carbide lamp between his teeth. With both hands, he grasped a protruding stone wall and climbed to the cave's summit.

Then, extending his right hand, he pushed an apparently ordinary

stone behind him, wedging it between the side wall and the cave roof.
A pitch-black hole materialized, allowing someone as tall as Simon to bend over and crawl through.
The hidden tunnel had been fashioned using a long-forgotten ventilation system that already existed in a nearby quarry.
The three of them hunched over and strode deeper into the underground tunnel. Gradually, the sounds of the underground river and the steam subway faded away.
Apart from their own breathing and footsteps, the surroundings were silent as a tomb.
After nearly half an hour, Lumian and his companions followed the markings on the map and leaped from an exit, emerging into an already existing underground cave.
From high above, stalactites dangled like the menacing teeth of a terrifying beast lurking in the darkness.
Lumian didn't rush to enter another hidden tunnel at the cave's base. Instead, he turned to "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo, who had accumulated a fair amount of dust on their heads. Wearing a grave expression, he spoke.
"Before we proceed, let's confirm something to avoid any mishaps. We won't have time for verbal communication."
"Alright." Both "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon accepted Lumian's words without question.
With a subtle nod, Lumian replied, "Firstly, from the moment we enter the second tunnel until we return here, no one is allowed to speak. Make use of physical gestures as much as possible. If that's not feasible, you must obtain my permission before uttering a word."
This precautionary measure stemmed from Gardner Martin's advice regarding the lack of need for communication with the trader. Lumian had expanded its scope and made it absolute to prevent any potential mishaps.
Christo and Simon recalled the Boss's counsel and nodded in agreement.
Observing their response, Lumian pressed on, "Secondly, no matter what anomalies occur, unless something attacks both of you, stay calm and act in accordance with my lead.
"Thirdly, I won't force you, but if you wish to survive, it's best to heed my instructions."
These two requests were met with resistance from "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon. They would be entrusting their safety to Lumian's intelligence, skills, reactions, and knowledge. It was a departure from their usual reliance on their own wild Beyonder

instincts.
After a few seconds of hesitation, "Rat" Christo forced a smile, recollecting Ciel's strength and previous performances.
"I'll follow your arrangements, but if you fail to react in time and Taffy warns me of danger, I'll take matters into my own hands.
"Dammit, the longer I've been in this smuggling business, the more I dread Trier's underground."
"Giant" Simon chimed in, "I'm with you on that, 'Rat.'"
Lumian felt a sense of satisfaction, having successfully "tamed" the two Beyonders who also served as leaders in the Savoie Mob. He didn't push further and simply nodded in agreement.
"No problem.
"Fourthly, I will be the one to make contact with the trader later and retrieve the box the Boss desires."
Upon hearing this, "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon looked at Lumian as if they were seeing Ciel in a new light.
They had expected the Pyromaniac to leverage his strength and authority to assign one of them to interact with the trader and handle the riskiest part of the mission. Alternatively, they thought Lumian might suggest drawing lots to determine who would handle the task. To their surprise, Lumian volunteered to take on the responsibility himself.
Ciel is quite fair... "Giant" Simon couldn't help but sigh.
He knew he wouldn't be able to do the same if he were in Lumian's position.
This realization made both "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon less resistant to following Lumian's instructions.
Though the lighting was dim, Lumian managed to observe his two colleagues' reactions.
He couldn't help but sneer inwardly.
If it weren't for the fact that you two Beyonders lack mystical knowledge and might cause trouble during the box exchange, I wouldn't be taking such a risk myself.
Lumian sighed from the depths of his heart. Sometimes, weakness could be an advantage.
Emphasizing that they were to maintain silence, Lumian picked up the carbide lamp and made his way to the bottom of the cave. He gestured for "Giant" Simon to embrace a rock about half his height and move it aside.
The rock was incredibly heavy, posing a challenge even for Simon's strength. It took him some time to shift it, revealing the deep entrance to the hidden tunnel.
The tunnel wasn't particularly long, and it took them only seven to eight minutes to crouch down and make their way through. They

arrived at a mineral cave that had suffered significant collapse, leaving only a limited space.
This was their destination—the Albert Mines.
Lumian surveyed the cluttered gray-black stones and turned to "Giant" Simon, who was dressed in a black formal suit. He pointed at his chest.
Understanding the unspoken request, Simon produced an iron-gray pocket watch and opened it with a snap.
The dial revealed numerous tightly clenched gears, exuding a sophisticated yet cold mechanical beauty.
"Giant" Simon held up his pocket watch, showing it to Lumian and "Rat" Christo, indicating that there were still over ten minutes until the designated time of the transaction—noon.
Lumian nodded and remained silent, patiently awaiting the appointed hour.
After a while, he subtly turned his head, listening intently for any signs of movement around them.
He sensed an unusual sound emanating from underground, as if a multitude of people were screaming, roaring, and fighting.
Beneath the illumination of the carbide lamp, Lumian glanced at Simon and Christo, noticing their similar reactions, as if they too had caught wind of the commotion.
Observing Simon and Christo's gazes fixed on him, Lumian lowered his right hand, signaling them to refrain from being affected.
Intermittently, they could hear peculiar movements. The three of them stood at the edge of the Albert Mines, silently waiting.
Suddenly, the sound of footsteps echoed from the other side of the mine, as if someone in leather shoes was approaching from an unusually quiet tunnel dozens of meters away.
Is that the trader? Lumian mused, casting his thoughtful gaze in that direction.
The footsteps paused and then resumed, resonating through the Albert Mines.
When they were merely a few meters away from the entrance, they mysteriously ceased altogether.
After a brief wait, Lumian and his companions spotted a figure emerging from the opposite mine entrance. It was a man over 1.8 meters tall, donning a white shirt, yellow vest, black formal suit, and dark pants. He clutched a small brown leather suitcase in his hand.
The man wore a silk top hat pulled low, casting a shadow over his face. However, Lumian's Hunter eyesight allowed him to discern the man's appearance with the aid of the three carbide lamps.

The man had short auburn hair, brownish-red eyes, slightly unkempt and thick beard, and thick eyebrows. He resembled a starved male bear, exaggeratedly thin.
The collar of his shirt was tightly fastened, as if he dreaded the cold.
Lumian held the carbide lamp and was about to approach the man.
But then, Christo tugged at his arm.
When Lumian turned his head, Christo anxiously and fearfully pointed at his right pocket.
Does this mean that Taffy, the peculiar rat, has issued a warning of danger? But judging from Christo's behavior, the threat hasn't materialized yet and is still manageable. Otherwise, he would have already turned and fled... Lumian interpreted the signs and nodded at Christo, indicating that he would proceed with caution.
Christo didn't stop him. He watched Lumian with concern as he advanced toward the trader.
As he closed the distance, Lumian's gaze carefully assessed the man's physique, analyzing every detail.
His clothes are slightly oversized, as though they don't quite fit him... He seems fearful of something, yet his eyes hold anger and hatred... His hands don't extend beyond his sleeves, and they're concealed within, including the handle of the suitcase... His feet...
Lumian's pupils dilated as he noticed that the trader wasn't wearing shoes but rather a pair of gray socks.
This contradicted the sound of leather shoes they had just heard!
Could it be that the footsteps didn't belong to him but someone else? Lumian grew increasingly vigilant.
With limited space remaining in the Albert Mines, he swiftly arrived in front of the trader.
The man, resembling a starved bear, chuckled and inquired with a hint of amusement, "Did Gardner Martin send you?
"Was he scared out of his wits after receiving a message from his companion, who went underground to search for the entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier, months after disappearing, claiming to possess an important item to deliver to him."

Chapter 274: Escape

The entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier? The Iron and Blood Cross Order is hunting for it? This person reappeared after vanishing for months? Lumian's mind raced upon hearing the trader's words.

He kept in mind the warning not to speak and tried his best not to. Leaning forward slightly, he extended his right hand to receive the small brown leather suitcase.

The man, resembling a starved bear, didn't refuse and chuckled.

"If I were Gardner Martin, I'd pray I never find out what's in this box."

What does this mean? Lumian wondered as his palm touched the suitcase.

At that moment, his eyes narrowed as he noticed the trader's right palm was absent from the suitcase's handle, floating as if held by an invisible force.

Following the handle, Lumian saw there was no arm in the sleeve. It was empty, supported by something invisible!

No arm! His heart tightened as he glanced up at the trader. His brownish-red eyes, accentuated by his thick beard and eyebrows, were as cold as a wild beast's, filled with undisguised hatred and fear.

Various thoughts raced through Lumian's mind as he forced himself to control his reaction. He calmly took the suitcase, not inquiring or observing. He didn't instinctively defend or attack, as if he hadn't noticed anything.

The trader's emotions seemed to shift slightly, and his laughter carried a hint of sorrow.

"Tell Gardner Martin that it won't be long before he goes underground too!

"All the pain and torture I've endured, he too will experience them!"

Lumian didn't say a word. He picked up the small suitcase and was about to turn around and leave the Albert Mines with "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed from the other entrance behind the trader.

Compared to earlier, it became much clearer, almost within arm's reach.

Lumian felt more certain now; he could hear the distinct sound of leather shoes approaching from the silent tunnel!

In an instant, a figure emerged before Lumian, Christo, and Simon. It was a man, completely naked, his head missing, blood oozing from the neck wound.

He wore only dark-blue shorts and strapless black leather shoes.

With two swift steps, the headless monster reached the trader from behind, stretching out its hands, seizing his head, and yanking it upwards.
"Save me! Save me!" cried the trader, unable to hide his panic and fear.
Almost simultaneously, his entire head was lifted, exposing a blood-stained spine dangling below. The spine was unusually long, swaying gently like a tail.
Silently, the trader's shirt, vest, pants, and formal attire lost support and collapsed to the ground.
He had no body left, only his head connected to the bloody spine.
"Save me! Save me!" The trader struggled with all his might, but the headless monster held him tightly, seemingly attempting to stuff him into its empty neck.
Although Lumian had encountered many terrifying and warped creatures in Cordu, this was the first time he had come across something so bizarre and terrifying.
Without hesitation, he turned around and dashed towards the entrance of the hidden tunnel, ignoring the trader's pleas for help.
"Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo, who had been frightened from the very start, finally lost control. Like cyclists hearing the starting signal, they bent down and hurried into the tunnel.
Lumian caught up with them in a few strides, the echoing voice of the Albert Mines haunting their trail.
"Save me! Save me!"
"If I die, you guys can forget about living!"
"Help!"
With their carbide lamps in hand, the trio silently made their way through the hidden tunnel, their hearts constricting at the screams left behind.
A few minutes passed, and the shrill cries suddenly ceased, leaving an eerie silence that enveloped the Albert Mines.
Then, the echoing sound of tapping leather shoes reverberated through the hidden tunnel.
"Rat" Christo, being the shortest, found it easiest to keep his back bent as he moved forward. In a state of fear, he frantically pointed at his pocket with his right hand, as if he had seen death itself.
Has that peculiar rat given us a perilous warning? Lumian glanced at Christo's left chest and nodded reassuringly, indicating that he would cover their rear. All they needed to do was run with all their might.
As the tapping sounds drew nearer, Lumian and the others grew tense.
Though they had to bend their backs to navigate the concealed

tunnel, it only slightly reduced their escape speed. After all, they were skilled Beyonders, their physical abilities notably enhanced.
With each passing moment, Lumian felt a chill down his spine. Just as the sound of the leather shoes approached to within a few meters, the trio finally reached the tunnel exit and burrowed out.
Seeing "Giant" Simon about to flee on his own, Lumian, who had already returned to their agreed position, could no longer stay silent. He lowered his voice and growled, "Block the door!"
As he spoke, he turned around and abandoned the carbide lamp and small suitcase, attempting to push the heavy rock beside the exit.
"Giant" Simon subconsciously ignored Lumian's command, but his heart still trembled from the low shout.
Throughout their journey, he had grown accustomed to following his instructions, as if it were the only way to ensure his survival.
He found himself caught in a dilemma.
After a brief moment of hesitation, "Giant" Simon suspected that if he ran away and left Ciel to fend for himself against the monster, Ciel might very well attack him and kill him as a deserter once he survived the attack!
"Rat" Christo had similar thoughts, but he believed that if they both didn't help, Ciel wouldn't waste time blocking the tunnel exit. When the time came, whoever ran the slowest would become the monster's first target, buying enough time for the other two to escape.
After evaluating each other's pathway characteristics and Sequences, Christo realized he was definitely the slowest. Moreover, he couldn't injure "Giant" Simon and "Lion" Ciel in a short period of time, meaning he couldn't slow them down and overtake them.
Without hesitation, he stopped fleeing and returned to the tunnel exit, assisting Lumian in pushing the stone to block the door.
Taking a cue from the "Rat," "Giant" Simon chose to obey and turned around.
Together, in just a few seconds, the trio secured the entrance to the hidden tunnel.
The sound of footsteps faded into nothingness.
Simultaneously, "Rat" Christo couldn't contain his surprise and delight, exclaiming, "Everything's fine now!"
There was no more visible movement in his pocket, where the rat named Taffy resided.
Lumian didn't share Christo's exuberance. He picked up the carbide lamp and small suitcase, speaking in a deep voice, "Let's talk when we get back to the first underground level."

"Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo's relaxed minds tensed up once more. Instinctively, they followed Lumian up the rock wall and turned into another hidden tunnel.
Along the way, they didn't encounter any attacks, but being underground meant they were surrounded by either complete silence or occasional strange sounds. After their recent fright, the environment was far from pleasant for them. If Lumian hadn't remained calm and composed, "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo might have resorted to drastic measures.
Upon returning to the area corresponding to the streets and squares above ground, "Rat" Christo reached into his pocket to comfort Taffy and let out a long sigh.
"When I saw that monster, I thought we were going to die right there."
Though he and Simon had killed over ten people, interacted with other Beyonders, and even fought them, they had never encountered a monster like the headless one before. It was an abnormal horror they had never experienced.
This was even scarier than the horror stories they had heard in their youth!
Lumian smiled.
"Didn't the Boss say that there won't be much risk if we don't communicate or open the box?"
However, in such a situation, most people couldn't stay calm! "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo gained a newfound appreciation for Ciel's mental fortitude.
Thanks to the shock brought about by the trader and the headless monster, Lumian and his companions weren't interested in what lay inside the box. They hurriedly left the underground and returned to 11 Rue des Fontaines, where they met Gardner Martin in the study.
Gardner Martin took the small suitcase and examined it casually. He smiled and said, "Very good. You've all done well. I'll reward you later."
After praising them, the Savoie Mob boss looked at Lumian and nodded gently.
"I have a message for you. If you wish to progress further on the Hunter pathway, you must remember this sentence:
'The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else's.'"
The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else's... Lumian couldn't fully grasp the true meaning of this sentence, but Gardner Martin didn't provide further explanation.
As his three subordinates left the study, Gardner Martin turned to the door connecting to the activity room.

The door creaked open, and a man in a half top hat, white shirt, yellow vest, black suit, and dark pants approached.
He had short auburn hair, brownish-red eyes, a thick, messy beard, and thick eyebrows, resembling a starving bear. He was the trader who had given the small suitcase to Lumian and the others and been dragged back by the headless monster.
"Olson, any thoughts on him?" Gardner Martin inquired.
The trader addressed as Olson replied with a smile, "Simple background, clear origins, smart, bold, and decisive. He could bring together a few people who were originally unrelated into a team in a short period of time. Isn't that what you want?
"As for loyalty, that's the least of my worries. When the time comes, even if he's not loyal, he'll become loyal."
Gardner Martin nodded slightly.
"Observe him for a while longer and see who he interacts with."
After discussing this topic, Gardner Martin looked at the small suitcase on the table and asked curiously, "What's inside?"
"Like I said, you'd better pray you never find out." The trader known as Olson smiled, picked up the suitcase, and left the study.
After taking a few steps in the hall, he suddenly found his head a little tilted. He raised his hands, held his head, and straightened it with a snap.

Chapter 275: Poaching

In the carriage heading back to the market district, Lumian stared out the window, reflecting on Gardner Martin's actions after completing the mission.

He felt that the Savoie Mob's boss didn't seem too concerned about the suitcase they risked their lives for. The boss merely glanced at it casually and placed it on the desk.

Was it really some kind of test? The Iron and Blood Cross Order possesses information about the spine-dangling head and headless monster. As long as I stick to the prescribed procedure and don't act independently, they won't really come after me?

But the Boss used to be a Conspirer. Perhaps he just wanted us to see the suitcase, but it might not reveal his true intentions...

Regardless, the head-only trader and the headless humanoid monster are real. *What do they symbolize? Can I trust the words of the former?* He disappeared for months searching for the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier and experienced terrifying events. His head and body got separated, and both gained consciousness?

When Boss said, "The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else's," it felt like he was warning me not to trust others easily... Did he mention this because he was satisfied with my performance on the mission?

Has he sent someone to secretly follow and observe us in detail? Or maybe "Giant" Simon or "Rat" Christo are not as scared as they seem and one of them is secretly working as a spy for the Boss?

Since the Boss didn't keep me here, the "audit" isn't over yet. Could someone be tailing this carriage and lurking in the shadows?

Heh heh, Mr. K and his subordinates love doing this too. It'd be amusing if they ran into each other...

In the carriage, "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon, who were using the Salle de Bal Brise's carriage to return to the market district, grew a bit uneasy as Lumian remained silent and gazed out of the window.

After five minutes of indescribable silence, Christo forced a smile and asked, "Ciel, what are you looking at?"

"It's too cramped," Lumian sighed, disregarding the question.

Christo and Simon exchanged glances, thinking that Ciel might be mocking them for taking up space in the carriage.

After hesitating for a moment, Christo decided to share his intentions.

He lowered his voice and said, "Ciel, I want to use this opportunity to talk to you. Damn it, I didn't expect Simon to join us!"

"Son of a sow. I was the one who suggested borrowing the carriage

in the first place!" "Giant" Simon retorted.
Ignoring him, Christo continued, "Ciel, this mission has allowed me to reacquaint myself with you. Apart from Boss, you are the most intelligent, powerful, and calmest Beyonder around me."
The calmest? You haven't seen me when I'm impulsive... Lumian teased, deliberately provoking.
"Is that so? Am I more intelligent than Brignais and stronger than Franca?"
"Rat" Christo was at a loss for words. After a few seconds, he said, "Uh, well... what I mean is, in the future, when the Boss assigns me secret missions, I want your help to analyze and figure out what to do. I don't want to be flustered when facing a similar monster next time."
Oh, intel has come knocking on my door? Lumian smiled and replied, "I don't mind helping, but aren't you afraid the Boss will be angry if he finds out?"
Christo glanced at Lumian, then at "Giant" Simon beside him, and his tone turned cold.
"If you keep quiet, and we keep quiet, the Boss won't find out."
Simon's eyelids twitched, and he added, "My thoughts align with Rat's."
He didn't want to die on the next secret mission either.
Lumian pondered for a moment and grinned.
"Alright, I can assist, but I can't guarantee I'll uncover the truth or find a way to avoid danger based solely on your descriptions. Also, I might make some small requests."
"No problem!" "Rat" Christo agreed without hesitation.
Today's encounter alone wouldn't have pushed him to this state. He had just escaped the mirror people incident, and his nerves were on edge.
"Giant" Simon also expressed his agreement. Then, he looked at Lumian and cursed himself softly,
He cleared his throat and said, "Ciel, my Big Bro, I apologize. I wasn't too friendly before, and I even encouraged you to deal with 'Red Boots' when you were new to the Savoie Mob and knew little about us.
"I'm a rough and unrefined guy. I can't say pleasant words, but I hope you can accept my apology. In the future, I, Simon, will follow your lead!"
Wow, you've grasped the situation so quickly, and you're so humble... This fellow is quite a talent... Lumian pretended to be nonchalant and replied, "I've already forgotten about the past. Besides, have I targeted you or sought revenge recently?"
With that said, Lumian added inwardly, Well, it's mostly because

I'm too busy to bother with a mere mob leader like you...
Simon breathed a sigh of relief, convinced that Ciel wasn't too petty.
Lumian smiled and questioned, "Why do you call me Big Bro? I'm much younger than you."
Simon smiled sheepishly.
"You're already a Sequence 7. In terms of strength, I should call you Big Bro."
Lumian couldn't help but jest, "If you stick to addressing someone by their Sequence, will you have to call me 'Uncle' once I reach Sequence 6?"
Simon hesitated for a moment before clearing his throat.
"If you wish..."
Damn it, isn't this guy too shameless? Is he like this even when talking to the Boss privately? "Rat" Christo turned his head in surprise and looked at the burly man, who stood more than 1.9 meters tall, as though this was the first time he had met this giant.
Simon continued, "But I believe I'll reach Sequence 7 before you hit Sequence 6.
"You must have just become a Pyromaniac. It might take years, even decades, to fully master the power of flames and withstand the next potion."
He was implying: "Haha, I was just joking. Perhaps we'll both be Sequence 7s soon, and you'll still be my Big Bro."
Upon hearing this, Lumian's mind wandered back to the moment he had used invisible flames to burn Susanna Mattise to death, feeling the potion digesting a little inside him.
However, he couldn't be sure as he hadn't yet completed the first acting principle, making the degree of digestion unclear.
Combining past experiences and recent events in the market district, Lumian sensed that the first acting principle was close to being revealed, but it always fell short. His thoughts lacked clarity, and he had a feeling that he needed to wait for the right opportunity.
His mind then shifted to Gardner Martin's possible covert observations and subsequent tests.
As a result, Lumian decided to postpone his plans to attend Mr. Fool's bishop's preaching at Lavigny Dock in the square district the day after tomorrow. He felt it would be better to wait until he passed the test and officially joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
But what about my psychiatric treatment scheduled for tomorrow afternoon? *Should I still go?*
I believe my mental state and emotional control have improved

over the past few days, but I'll need the two ladies to confirm it. Yes, they always use Psychological Invisibility. Madam Justice is a true demigod, so it's unlikely for Gardner Martin or his subordinates to see her. As a Hunter, it's normal for me to have an interest in studying plants. After visiting the botanical garden, I'll have a coffee and take a break. No one can accuse me of anything... Lumian made a quick decision to continue the psychiatric treatment the next day.
However, before heading to Mason's café, he planned to spend two to three hours exploring the nearby botanical garden.
Once the carriage stopped at Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian went upstairs to enjoy a cup of coffee while watching "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo leave Avenue du Marché.
Around 4 p.m., he put on a dark wide-brimmed round hat and left the dance hall. His destination was Franca's place at Rue des Blouses Blanches to discuss the peculiar mission and Gardner Martin's behavior in the afternoon.
As Lumian strolled along Avenue du Marché, a sudden thought struck him.
If Boss is indeed sending someone to watch my actions during this period, he might think I'm having an affair with Franca if I frequent her apartment on Rue des Blouses Blanches.
But maybe, as a Trierien, he wouldn't mind?
Right, there's already a rumor about me having an affair with Jenna. I'm going to Rue des Blouses Blanches to find Jenna, not Franca. He won't be suspicious...
Lumian calmed himself and arrived at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches. He knocked on the door of Room 601.
Franca, who was wearing her usual blouse and light-colored pants, snapped, "Why are you here again?"
At that moment, Lumian noticed peculiar drawings on her face—a turd on the left side and a dark green turtle on the right.
"Lost at cards?" Lumian raised an eyebrow.
Franca had mentioned playing cards with Jenna and her dancers, involving strange punishments without money being at stake.
Franca glanced back and lowered her voice, "Jenna has been in a bad mood lately. I'm trying to find a way to cheer her up."
Lumian followed her gaze and noticed that Jenna's face was also decorated with strange drawings—moles and a pig's mouth. The lead dancer had similar marks.
"In that case, I'll wait for you to finish," Lumian said as he entered the living room.
Assuming Ciel was there for Jenna, the lead dancer hurriedly got up, washed her face, and left Apartment 601.

Being in a better mood, Jenna teasingly asked Lumian, "Are you here for me or Franca?"
That came out wrong... Lumian replied honestly, "Boss assigned me a strange mission, and I want to consult Franca."
Curious, Franca asked, "What mission is it?"
Lumian briefly recounted the noon encounter, including how he managed to keep "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon in check, making them follow his instructions.
Both Franca and Jenna were scared by the head-only trader and the headless monster, and they fell into silence for a moment.
After a few seconds, Franca clenched her teeth and said, "Gardner Martin, that son of a bitch!"
"What's wrong?" Jenna didn't understand why Franca suddenly cursed the Boss.
Franca explained vaguely, "I suspect this mission is Gardner Martin's way of testing Ciel. He wants to see if Ciel is fit to enter the core group.
"Dammit, f*cking hell, I've been with him for so long, and he still doesn't trust me. He doesn't even want to test me!"

Chapter 276: The Disappointed Susie

Jenna, who had no experience in relationships and was clueless about the truth, didn't know how to respond to Franca's complaint.

Lumian roughly understood Franca's anger and disappointment.

We're all here to infiltrate the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Why is the test scheduled just a month after your joining? I've been here for nearly a year, and I'm almost giving birth to Gardner Martin's child, yet there's still no progress!

This makes me look like a failure!

After carefully considering Franca's thoughts, Lumian replied earnestly, "This might not be an opportunity, but a danger.

"The fact that they want to 'audit' me so quickly suggests they might see me as expendable. Or perhaps my Beyonder pathway is just right and could be useful for something recent."

Jenna found Lumian's explanation reasonable and quickly advised Franca, "Maybe the Boss didn't 'audit' you because he cares for you and doesn't want you involved in dangerous matters."

"..." Franca's expression turned odd. "That's not right..."

This made her feel guilty for deceiving others.

When Madam Judgment arranged for her to be an undercover agent in the Savoie Mob and wait for an opportunity to join the Iron and Blood Cross Order, she had been explicitly instructed not to sacrifice herself by seducing the target. The Tarot Club didn't engage in such tactics. Later, as a Witch, she wanted to experience a romantic relationship with a man, and Gardner Martin happened to be interested, so they became lovers.

From Franca's perspective, this was a pure, joy-sharing relationship that didn't involve any emotional aspects. They wouldn't have real expectations of each other. After the mission was completed, they would part ways without hesitation and continue with their exciting lives.

Of course, at that time, the Iron and Blood Cross Order might have already suffered a setback. It remained unknown if Gardner Martin could continue with his exciting life.

If Franca had enough strength, she would have rehearsed the scene of a cold assassin killing her lover.

After a few seconds, Franca exclaimed, "Impossible, impossible!"

"That guy is very chauvinistic and discriminates against women. Him not auditing me must be because he thinks that a woman should just manage the dancers well and have the ability to protect herself. She should just bear a child sometime later. She doesn't need to be qualified to join the core group!

"Dammit! Did I fail because of my gender?"

What she didn't want to admit was that the undercover mission had likely failed because she took a chance, which led her to form a stronger bond with Gardner Martin.
Cannon fodder didn't matter if they were male or female!
It didn't matter if the expendables of a secret organization were male or female either!
Jenna and Lumian exchanged glances and pursed their lips. Then, they turned to Franca and asked curiously, "How can you tell that the mission is a test?"
Those two monsters were undoubtedly terrifying and dangerous!
Jenna didn't think she was as foolish as Lumian had teased her, but she knew she lacked experience in mysticism and playing these kinds of games. Subconsciously, she yearned to learn more.
Franca smiled again and said confidently, "I deduced it from the whole process and final outcome.
"Think about it. Does this matter really require Ciel, Simon, and Christo's involvement?
"Find a couple of core members who understand the situation roughly. Follow the procedures and precautions, and you can escape the monsters and retrieve the box successfully. Moreover, there's no need to worry about leaks or give them any special reminders.
"No matter how dangerous the darkness around us seems, the fact that nothing happened this time suggests that there's a way and people to resist them. If someone else were to go, they could still complete the transaction."
Jenna pondered Franca's analysis for a while and exclaimed in admiration, "That's true... Dammit! Why didn't I think of that just now?"
Hearing this, Franca and Lumian exchanged smug and pleased glances.
The fact that Jenna could curse meant she was gradually feeling better!
Lumian had also considered this before concluding that the Boss was "auditing" him.
So, it was very likely that there were observers around him during this period.
After some thought, Lumian asked Franca, "Do you know what those two monsters are?"
They lurked underground and were suspected to be related to Fourth Epoch Trier. Lumian might have to venture underground in the future using Earth Blood mineral. Knowing about the terrifying monsters he might encounter would help in his preparations.
Franca appeared thoughtful.

After a while, she said uncertainly, "Neither I nor anyone I know has encountered such monsters, but I've heard rumors from sailors.
"On the Sonia Sea, there's a port called Bansy. Once, a humanoid monster with a spine and no head appeared there. It sounds quite similar to what you described, but the port is now abandoned, likely due to damage caused by a high-level power."
Bansy? Lumian wasn't unfamiliar with the term.
Madam Magician had used it once to illustrate Cordu's likely fate. It had been severely corrupted and directly destroyed by the Church, leaving a deep impression on Lumian.
After chatting for a while, Lumian and Jenna returned to Salle de Bal Brise. Jenna had changed into a beige fluffy short dress and transformed into Showy Diva.
Late at night, upon returning to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian drew the curtains and unfolded a piece of letter paper. He penned down his encounter, thoughts, and Franca's analysis, preparing to send it to Madam Magician.
Shortly after, he arranged the altar, creating a wall of spirituality, and summoned the arm-height puppet messenger.
In the faint blue candlelight, Lumian gazed at the pale-white spirit world creature in a light-gold dress, with light-blue eyes and pure golden hair. A sudden idea struck him, and he asked thoughtfully, "Is there someone monitoring me nearby?"
The messenger spoke in an ethereal and illusory manner, "Yes."
There really is... Lumian wasn't surprised and pressed further, "Can he or they discover that I'm summoning you?"
The messenger's eyes flickered as she replied disdainfully, "They're not worthy."
Relieved, Lumian thanked Miss Messenger and watched her vanish into the candlelight with the letter.
Before long, a neatly folded reply appeared on the desk in Room 207.
Lumian skillfully opened it and began reading.
"It's not a good thing to be chosen so quickly and be tested.
"From now on, especially after becoming an official member, you have to be more careful. Once you're assigned a mission and feel that things aren't simple, something that even Mr. K might not be able to handle, find an opportunity to summon my messenger and inform me.
"The two monsters you encountered are indeed similar to those in Bansy, but they are quite different. They seem to have their own consciousness.
"As for what abilities and characteristics they can display, since

Bansy Harbor has already been destroyed, I can't give you any useful information.
"I believe most of what the head said is true. What it didn't say was that it and its body might have entered Fourth Epoch Trier during the months he was missing.
"There's a high chance they possess a method to enter Fourth Epoch Trier. You need to pay special attention to this matter.
"By the way, the Sequence after Alms Monk is a Contractee. You need to sign a contract with different creatures and obtain one of their abilities. When the time comes, don't be in a hurry to choose. Write a letter and tell me that you already have the corresponding power. I can give you a pile of information on spirit world creatures for you to choose from. I have significant knowledge in this area. I'll also give you a copy of Sights in the Spirit World."
Madam Magician truly possesses a deep understanding of the spirit world... Lumian gleefully crumpled the letter and watched it fuse with the crimson flames.
...
On the sunny Sunday afternoon, Lumian satisfied his hunger and hopped into a public carriage headed for Trier's botanical garden. After buying tickets, he leisurely strolled through the vibrant flora.
He marveled at the sight of many plants he had only encountered in books, newspapers, and magazines, including the Donningsman Tree, which the Intisians mocked as Loen's national tree.
These trees originally thrived in the rainforests of the Southern Continent. Legend had it that the sap from these trees could promote hair growth, a tempting prospect for many Loenians lacking significant hair volume.
Around 3:30 p.m., Lumian made his way to Mason café and settled into Booth D. He ordered a cup of Reem espresso, eagerly anticipating the arrival of Psychiatrist Madam Susie.
Before long, he heard a familiar, gentle female voice.
"Good afternoon, Mr. Lumian Lee."
Without turning around, Lumian smiled and replied, "Good afternoon, Madam Susie."
Susie commented, sounding surprised, "Your mental state seems better than I expected."
Lumian smiled wryly.
"Perhaps it's thanks to my previous treatment that I've regained some inner strength.
"As the saying goes, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."
Susie expressed her curiosity, asking in a conversational tone, "I wonder if you're willing to share your experiences?"

Lumian pondered for a moment before looking ahead and muttering to himself, "Are you in the same organization as Madam Magician?"
"Yes," Susie confirmed.
Relaxing, Lumian leaned back on the sofa, sipped his espresso, and began recounting his ordeal.
From capturing Louis Lund to taking down Susanna Mattise and saving the lives of most people involved in Paramita, he concluded, "Since that day, my mental state has significantly improved. It's like a fire still burning within my heart."
Susie responded gently, "Sometimes, life itself plays the role of a psychiatrist. Those experiences indeed triggered your inner strength and improved your condition. However, it also requires resilience and a suitable personality. Otherwise, one might easily descend into a state of collapse, despair, self-blame, and abandonment."
"And this vulnerability might be exploited by the angel sealed within you."
At this point, Susie's emotions were complicated. She added with a hint of disappointment, "Your remarkable progress has rendered the treatment plan I prepared for today useless."

Chapter 277: Guidance

Susie's words elicited a chuckle from Lumian. "Isn't that a good thing?"

Susie replied, smiling, "That's a good thing. One of the happiest moments for every psychiatrist is to see their patient gradually emerge from their trauma."

Lumian probed, "Can we move on to the next stage of treatment?"

"Let's have a chat first. I'll assess your mental state." Susie's voice was gentle, and her demeanor remained calm.

"About what?" Lumian had already shared most of his recent experiences.

Susie verbally ruminated for a few seconds before responding, "We can talk about what else you're confused or troubled about."

Lumian fell silent momentarily before continuing, "Am I really the unlucky one? Will I bring disaster to the people around me?"

This time, it wasn't Susie who answered, but the other lady.

She said with a soothing chuckle, "If disaster is the inevitable fate of those around us, it isn't your fault. If it comes because of you and fate turns sour, it just means that destiny isn't set in stone.

"The entity sealed inside you by Mr. Fool isn't the entity named Inevitability—just an angel from the same realm. He can't use His powers and can only rely on others, so He can't determine a changed fate."

"So, you're saying I had a chance to change their fates, but I blew it all?" Lumian sipped his espresso, his voice unconsciously deepening.

The woman maintained her tone.

"First, we gotta be sure that the person who messed with their fate and caused their doom is the companion of that Inevitability angel lurking around you. He came for the seal and Termiboros. It's got nothing to do with you.

"Your only issue is that you didn't do good enough, but nobody can guarantee perfection in everything."

At this point, the woman spoke with a hint of self-deprecation,

"I get your feelings. Over the years, I've tried my best to do many things, but many of them failed. I even ended up hurting others despite my good intentions. It hit me hard and made me feel real guilty. I felt like running away and never coming back.

"Thankfully, during that time, I managed to achieve a lot. I helped people, stopped disasters, and rooted out corruption. That gave me confidence and motivation, strengthening my beliefs and ideas.

"Later, whenever I felt confident and positive about what I wanted to do, I'd remember my mistakes and failures. It would remind me

not to be careless, not to be biased, and not to underestimate anyone.
"Likewise, when setbacks and guilt hit me, I'd remember the people I helped and the disasters I prevented. It reminded me that I'm not all bad, and my beliefs and ideas have a positive side.
"Our past experiences are both a burden and a source of strength, motivation, and growth."
Lumian listened intently, finally facing the guilt in his heart and not suppressing it anymore.
Maybe some tragedies could've been avoided if I knew more about mysticism.
It is my problem, but I'm not the one causing the disaster. I just haven't done a good enough job. I need to fix this weakness. I gotta strive to improve and be more careful in the future. I can genuinely save those who want help and bring disaster to those bastards who intentionally cause harm...
As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian recalled the peddlers, pedestrians, and tenants who had fallen from the Tree of Shadow. He remembered how he had watched with a smile.
Phew... He let out a slow breath, leaning back against the sofa.
"I feel much better now."
He scoffed and said, "The person who helped Termiboros and messed with my fate and the people around me couldn't have guessed that the pain he caused didn't break me, make me despair, or give up. Instead, it led me to get excellent psychiatric treatment, improving my mental state significantly.
"I really want to find him and 'thank' him in person."
The lady chuckled.
"That's why I keep telling Susie that psychiatric treatment is tricky and subtle. If you're not careful, it could lead to the opposite outcome. You can't just be fearless because you're a Beyonder.
"Hmm... Let me remind you of something.
"We can't assume the target's current intentions solely based on their original image and goals without sufficient evidence."
Lumian didn't quite understand.
"What do you mean?"
The lady explained in a gentle voice, "Many people are deceived because they always assume the other person remains the same, believing that their personalities and thoughts won't change due to the environment, experiences, and circumstances.
"Take what you just said as an example. Have you considered another possibility? Termiboros's companion might have deliberately brought those misfortunes not to make you collapse, but to stimulate you and awaken the power in your heart,

allowing you to break free from your mental cage and regain your mental state?"
"How is that possible?" Lumian responded subconsciously.
Could Termiboros's companion be so benevolent?
She smiled and replied, "Just because I'm giving an example doesn't mean it's true.
"But why is that impossible? Perhaps that person initially wanted to cooperate with Termiboros and use various methods to influence your state and create an opportunity for Him to escape the seal. However, gradually, he realized that this was an opportunity that could turn him into an angel.
"As he receives more boons and sees the angelic-level door, he can extract Termiboros's power by controlling you. He can even undo the seal and devour Him while He is weak.
"And to increase the probability of success, he has to ensure that you're in good condition. You can extract Termiboros's power time and time again, weakening Him.
"How is it? Does he have a motive to help you improve your mental state?"
Lumian fell silent.
The more he thought about it, the more he realized that from a human's perspective, this was an undeniable possibility.
After a few seconds, he retorted, "Is that person not afraid of angering the entity known as Inevitability?
"The power from boons is definitely more influenced by the higher-ups. They are proud to carry out Their will and wouldn't have any blasphemous thoughts."
The woman in Psychological Invisibility laughed meaningfully and said, "The being known as Inevitability desires an obedient angel to descend upon this land. Whether it's Termiboros or another bestower, I reckon He holds no particular preference or inclination."
That's true. If someone devours Termiboros, they might become an angel of the Inevitability domain. Perhaps this is what Inevitability expects. If Termiboros can make it here, so be it. If He fails and faces a seal or purification, other bestowers will seek a way to devour His relic and become an angel. Ultimately, an angel in service of Inevitability will emerge on Earth. But the identity of this angel is not crucial... Lumian pondered as he nodded gently.
Suddenly, a wave of inspiration washed over Lumian. He considered the lady who was suspected of wielding the Justice card. Was she not only using this opportunity to teach him, but also conveying these words to Termiboros?
Could she be creating a rift between Termiboros and Inevitability,

making Him distrust His companion?
If I can think of this possibility, surely Termiboros can as well...
Uh, He could have figured this out, but since His companion has been discovered, he wouldn't dare to show himself for a long while, nor would he communicate with Him. In such times, suspicions would easily grow between them.
Once the seed of suspicion took root and flourished, it would prove difficult to uproot in the future!
A Spectator is truly terrifying...
Lumian sighed and said sincerely, "I understand."
The lady smiled and said, "So, we can't assume that people won't change; they can evolve over time. We need to pay close attention to their circumstances and thoughts.
"Other Beyonders might not need to think so deeply, but your next Sequence is a Conspirer. You have to learn to analyze human nature."
Lumian nodded, gaining a fresh perspective on Gardner Martin's teachings. "The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else's."
Continuing the discussion, he smiled and asked, "Is it possible that Termiboros's companion intended to help me improve my mental state from the beginning?"
"That's a possibility," Susie replied, "but what would be the reason?"
"Why?" Lumian inquired.
His expression suddenly changed, and he sat up straight, trembling slightly.
"Maybe, just maybe, she wanted to help me. She's..."
The lady, suspected to be the holder of the Justice card, interrupted gently.
"Your memories are unlikely lying to you."
Lumian let out a long sigh and relaxed against the sofa once more.
The lady's voice remained soft as she continued, "However, in the world of mysticism, there are cases where a person's death might not be their true end.
"The world of mysticism holds too many mysteries.
"Once, I encountered a follower of an evil god. He suddenly died just as I was about to eliminate him. It felt too coincidental, so I examined his corpse, his fate, and various mystical connections. Everything seemed in order; he was truly dead, and his family and friends believed so as well.
"Later, when I was eradicating a subsidiary branch of an evil god cult, I came across him again. He had assumed a new identity with a new fate and mystical connection.
"This time, he met his final end. From him, I learned the Sequence name of an evil god pathway—Deceased. They can use death to

escape their original fate."
This is similar to the Substitution Spell, but it seems simpler and lacks prerequisites. Moreover, after the substitute's demise, the original identity and fate appear irretrievable... Lumian pondered on this, recalling a ritualistic magic that came with Alms Monk.

Chapter 278: Consultation

The lady believed to hold the Justice card fell silent, and it was Susie who spoke up.

"Your mental state has improved significantly. If you'd like, I can guide you back into the dream to awaken those forgotten memories."

"No problem." Lumian leaned against the sofa and closed his eyes.

Unbeknownst to him, he dozed off. He found himself in Cordu, bathed in sunlight amidst the mountains, surrounded by turquoise alpine pastures. White-gray sheep roamed like clouds, creating a painting-like scene.

The events unfolded like an art exhibition. Lumian alternated between experiencing them firsthand and observing as a bystander, his thoughts deeply immersed in the unfolding drama.

As the events progressed, the weather mirrored Lumian's mood, turning increasingly gray and devoid of sunlight. Occasionally, the fog lifted, revealing an azure sky.

These memories confirmed Lumian's suspicions. An anomaly had been brewing in the village from May to June of last year.

Initially, he didn't pay much attention, but by the end of the year, he realized the seriousness of the issue. Aurore didn't take his concerns seriously, dismissing them without investigation.

He later discovered skeletons in Louis Lund's closet and extracted information from him. In the new year, more villagers began revealing certain problems, leading some unaffected ones to sense that something was wrong. As a result, Ava, Reimund, Naroka, and others were silenced.

During this process, Lumian stumbled upon Pons Bénet and his crew burying a corpse and sought revenge, gravely injuring the villain's lower body. However, he couldn't take on the thugs alone and ultimately failed.

Pons Bénet almost crippled him, but Aurore arrived just in time to rescue him.

Only then did Lumian realize that something was amiss with his sister. She was suspected to be part of the padre's group and held a high status.

Most of the time, she appeared cold and indifferent, which was completely different from the sister Lumian knew. Only rarely did she show her true self. Worried for both her and her brother's future, she sought help.

However, she never mentioned summoning the messenger of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's vice president, Hela. The information in Lumian's dream likely came from her soul

fragment.
What followed matched Madame Pualis's account. Aurore stopped her, and Guillaume Bénet, the padre, led a large group of bestowers to attack the administrator's castle, dismantling her setup. She had no choice but to abandon the "territory" she had built up for a long time and leave Cordu with her remaining subordinates.
The only difference was Madame Pualis's claim that she had only given birth to one child whose father was the padre—he eventually perished in the attack. However, Aurore, a Blessed of Inevitability, stated that Madame Pualis had personally given birth to two children. One of them vanished after the administrator's castle was destroyed.
In the end, it wasn't Aurore who knocked Lumian out and brought him to the altar. It was the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, who also had a lizard-like elf crawl out of him in his dream.
Lumian blinked open his eyes, taking deep breaths to steady himself.
He had anticipated this moment, but the emotional upheaval still left him reeling.
Emerging from the nightmarish life of a street urchin, he had finally found a true, warm home with new friends and boundless joy. Even the villagers' chase and occasional beatings for his pranks couldn't dampen his spirits during those moments of triumph.
However, his idyllic life began to unravel as the people around him changed. The constant anomalies he noticed clouded his heart with growing unease and uncertainty. He tried to persuade his friends, Aurore, Reimund, Ava, and others, to leave Cordu and move to Darième, but Aurore always delayed, thwarting his plans.
Amidst his fear and disappointment, tragedy struck his friends. To his dismay, he even noticed disturbing signs in his own beloved sister.
In that moment, his mind plummeted into a dark abyss, much like when his grandfather had died. He felt terrified, helpless, sorrowful, and in pain.
But this time, he also felt a profound sense of despair.
Had it not been for the occasional glimmer of hope when Aurore briefly regained her true self, Lumian might not have held on till the end.
Even now, recollecting the past few months felt unbearable. It was as if he was trapped in a suffocating cage, surrounded by darkness and misery, unable to escape. It was suffocating, painful, and full of despair.
Phew, phew... Taking deep breaths, Lumian gradually regained his

composure and offered a bitter smile.
"Just as I suspected."
He hadn't personally experienced the remaining pieces of the puzzle concerning the catastrophe. He needed to decipher the dream's symbols or find the padre Guillaume Bénet to obtain the missing information.
Susie spoke in a gentle tone, "You've shown tremendous resilience and faced your past head-on. It's a sign that your psychological struggles have improved significantly. Now, the rest of the healing process lies in your own hands."
"If everything goes as planned, we should only have one more psychiatric session. After you find padre Guillaume Bénet and communicate with him, I'll need to evaluate your psychological state once again and conclude the treatment."
"Thank you, Madam Susie. Thank you..." Lumian hesitated before adding, "Madam Justice."
The woman in Psychological Invisibility didn't deny it and smiled, saying, "Just because we have only one session left doesn't mean we won't be in touch again. I might need your assistance with certain matters in the future."
Lumian smiled back, saying, "I'm only a Sequence 7. I doubt I'll be of much help."
"We should never underestimate anyone," the lady replied with a knowing smile. "Besides, different people can have unique impacts on different matters."
Lumian nodded and said, "No problem."
He pondered for a moment before changing the subject.
"Ladies, after the Cordu disaster, my sister pushed me away and instructed me to take note of her grimoires. Given your understanding of human nature, what might be hidden in her notebook, and where could it be?"
Though Lumian had studied Aurore's entire grimoire multiple times, he still couldn't grasp many aspects or find anything suspicious.
Susie responded promptly, "Aurore wouldn't have intentionally left any messages or clues in her grimoires. If there were, she would have told you directly or hinted at it once she regained consciousness."
Lumian nodded slowly, accepting her explanation. Aurore could have sought help from Hela's messenger, but she chose not to.
Susie continued, "I believe there might be something in the notebook that Aurore once considered normal, but later suspected was amiss. So, identifying any abnormalities through superficial observation alone would be challenging."

No wonder I've been stumped for so long... Lumian asked anxiously, "Then how can I figure out if there's a problem?"
The holder of the Justice card seemed lost in thought as she spoke, "Since you've deduced that the anomaly began in May or June of last year, focus on that particular time frame to find the root of the problem.
"If the source truly lies with Aurore, she must have encountered something before that period that caused her transformation. So, pay special attention to the grimoires six months prior. It's likely to contain something significant that triggered her change.
"Additionally, the grimoires from the last three months might reveal Aurore's true intentions. They are an essential part of the castle in her heart.
"If you analyze these two time periods, you're most likely to find something relevant."
January to June last year, and January to March this year... Lumian mentally noted Madam Justice's advice.
As Aurore's grimoire spanned over five years, narrowing down the suspected content would save Lumian a considerable amount of time and effort.
If he focused solely on the notebooks from those two periods, his workload would decrease by 90%, enabling him to analyze and consider them more effectively.
After a brief moment of contemplation, Lumian expressed his gratitude once again.
"Thank you, Madam Susie. Thank you, Madam Justice."
After their discussion, the psychiatric treatment came to an official close. Lumian finished the remaining espresso and left Mason café, waiting for the public carriage by the roadside.
In Trier, dark clouds gathered to the northwest in the distance, while raindrops cascaded down like threads. To the southeast, the sky remained azure, and pure white clouds were tinged with golden light.
...
Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
"Let's attend a gathering," Franca said to Jenna.
"What gathering?" Jenna, who hadn't yet put on her smoky makeup, asked with confusion.
Franca rarely invited her to such events.
Franca chuckled.
"A mysticism gathering. Now that you've digested the Assassin potion, you should consider advancing to Instigator. Attending mysticism gatherings, gathering materials and information, and earning money and supplies are compulsory tasks for every wild

Beyonder."
"Advancing?" Jenna was bewildered, as the term was unfamiliar to her.
Franca clicked her tongue and explained, "An important figure told me that the number of evil god believers will increase in the foreseeable future. The same goes for various mysticism-related disasters.
"If you wish to protect yourself, your brother, and the people you care about, you must progress step by step on the divine paths and grow stronger."
Jenna fell silent for a few seconds before finally nodding and saying, "Okay."
"Then let's go." Franca smiled again.
However, Jenna hesitated for a moment before adding, "Should we invite Ciel? It seems like he also needs to attend mysticism gatherings."
"..." Franca's expression froze.

Chapter 279: Deep Valley Cloister

After a moment, Franca forced on a reassuring smile and spoke, "Don't worry about him. He's got his own mystical gatherings."

Jenna nodded and didn't say much more.

With disguises, masks, and a bit of makeup, they left 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches and made their way to Avenue du Marché. They hopped on Subway Line 2, which connected the bustling market district's Suhit steam locomotive station to the elegant cathedral district's Northern Trier Train Station. Their destination was Quartier 9, the renowned Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra in the Northern Continent.

They arrived at the world's largest and most vibrant arcade, surrounded by department stores and fancy shops. The colorful glass dome above, supported by steel frames, painted the sunlight with a touch of grandeur, showcasing scenes of sacredness and epic tales.

To make up for the dimness from the stained glass, new kerosene lamps on the iron-black street lamp poles burned brightly, emitting a dazzling white light.

They were called draft lamps that utilized the heat they generated to turn kerosene into steam, spraying it onto the scorching mantle around it, creating a bright white light.

In terms of illumination, they were far superior to conventional gas street lamps or regular household kerosene lamps, a modification of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery.

Jenna followed Franca into the public washroom in the middle of the Opera House arcade. Each found a stall, changed their clothes, and applied simple makeup to downplay their looks.

After that, they headed underground through a nearby entrance.

Unlike other districts in Trier, the underground street beneath the Opera House arcade was bustling with people. Cafés, galleries, beer houses, and small shops filled the space, making it feel anything but dark, cold, or confined.

Only when they left the area did Jenna find her usual impression of Underground Trier.

As Assassins, they could see in the dark. However, to avoid exposing their Sequence abilities to those attending the mysterious gathering, they each held a carbide lamp that cast a bluish-yellow light ahead.

Studying Franca's actions closely, Jenna mimicked her and donned a silver metal mask that covered the upper half of her face. Silently, she ventured deeper into the damp tunnel.

After walking for a while, Franca pointed to a fork in the road and

smiled.
"There's a legend of ghosts in that direction."
"What's the legend?" Jenna asked, playing along.
Franca grinned and replied, "They say people in the opera house often hear strange male voices coming from underground. They hired several bounty hunters to investigate, but none of them returned."
"Didn't the official Beyonders intervene?" Jenna inquired, puzzled.
"They did, but they found nothing. That's because it's a legend we made up," Franca chuckled.
Jenna was even more perplexed.
"Why make up such a legend?"
For amusement?
Franca assured her, smiling, "To prevent the people of Underground Trier from meddling with our gathering."
Jenna finally realized the reason behind it.
"So, you scared them off, and they wouldn't dare come here?"
"No." Franca shook her head with a serious expression. "No, it's not about scaring them away. It's about diverting their attention to that area, so they don't bother with the surroundings. In simpler terms, it gives the adventurous Trier citizens and university students something to keep them occupied."
Having grown up in Trier, Jenna fell silent. After a few seconds, she muttered, "Dammit! The Trieriens around me are nothing like this!"
Everyone worked diligently. They just liked to go to bars, dance halls, and other places to drink, sing, dance, or vent their emotions by cursing each other after a busy day.
"People from Trier can be different," Franca said, clicking her tongue and shaking her head.
As they talked, they squeezed through a gap and entered a new tunnel, arriving at a quarry cave overgrown with dark green moss.
Outside the quarry cave stood a white skeleton, its face hidden behind an iron mask, its eye sockets dark and empty.
Jenna, who had never encountered anything related to mysticism before, couldn't help but feel her heart race with fear.
Franca raised her hand and greeted, "You always send a skeleton. Is all this caution really necessary?"
"Dammit, you even put a mask on the skeleton. What's there to be embarrassed about?" she added.
The white skeleton spoke with a voice that sounded like metal rubbing against metal, "I like a line from The Adventurer series: 'That's basic courtesy.'"
With its eye sockets devoid of flames, it looked at Jenna.

"Who is she?"
"My friend. I brought her here to take a look," Franca simply replied.
The skeleton didn't push for more information. It cracked its neck, signaling that they could enter the quarry cave at the back.
Inside, Jenna saw many people in various disguises, either sitting on rocks or standing in a corner. Silence enveloped the place.
After scanning the area, Jenna lowered her voice and asked Franca, "They're letting me in just like that?"
Isn't this too easy?
Aren't they concerned about my trustworthiness or safety?
Franca smirked and replied, "I trust him, and he trusts me."
"Is that so..." Jenna nodded, but she sensed something strange. "How did that skeleton know it was you? Weren't you disguised?"
"He has a special way of recognizing people," Franca vaguely explained.
Fifteen minutes later, more people arrived one after another. By the time the iron-masked skeleton announced the official commencement of the trade gathering, nearly twenty people had gathered in the quarry cave.
Jenna observed the transactions with curiosity, absorbing the new terms as Franca whispered them to her.
During this process, she couldn't help but be shocked by the prices of potion formulas, mystical items, Beyonder weapons, and various ingredients. Even the cheapest ones required an entire week's salary as an underground singer. As for the expensive ones, she felt that she had no hope in her life.
The last third of the trade gathering focused on commissions. Jenna sat up straight, hoping to find one that could earn her a large sum of money.
A man dressed in a black robe, resembling a Warlock from horror stories, spoke in a deliberately shrill voice, "I have a mission worth 20,000 verl d'or."
20,000 verl d'or? All eyes in the room turned to the entrustee.
Jenna was no exception. She had never seen such a large sum of money in her life.
The man glanced around and said, "The gatekeeper of the Deep Valley Cloister in the hill district has been missing for three days. I hope you can help me find him or his corpse.
"I can't verify the authenticity of the clues, so only those who bring him or his corpse back to the Deep Valley Cloister can claim the 20,000 verl d'or reward.
"Alternatively, you can bring him here."
The Deep Valley Cloister belonged to the Church of the God of

Steam and Machinery, where ascetic monks devoted themselves to the study of machinery and steam. They didn't marry, have children, or preach.
Located in the hill district, Quartier 19, it was bordered by the cathedral district of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery's cathedral and the Northern Trier Train Station to the west, and Quartier 20, the cemetery district, to the east.
Seeing no immediate response, the man continued, "The authorities have already investigated, but they found nothing.
"You can all take this commission and investigate Deep Valley Cloister as bounty hunters. Don't worry about suspicion. I'll post notices in bars, dance halls, and beer houses in various districts."
I can give it a try. It won't cost me anything if I come up with nothing. At most, it'll take some time from me making money...
Jenna turned to Franca, tempted.
Franca nodded, agreeing that they could take on this mission.
She was curious about the case, and she wanted Jenna to gain some experience before resorting to dangerous assassinations. If they sensed any danger or discovered something amiss, they could retreat in time.
Of course, the high bounty was also appealing.
After a brief silence, the participants began asking questions one after another.
They wanted to gather enough information before starting their investigations.
The entrustee's responses were brief. He informed everyone that the missing cloister's gatekeeper was Pinker, a resident of nearby Deep Valley Town in his early fifties. He was a devout believer of the God of Steam and Machinery, and he had never married. With a fanatical passion for machinery, he became a gatekeeper at Deep Valley Cloister after owning fields.
He returned home once a week, spending one day each time, but he didn't disappear at home.
One night, while the monks were testing a steam contraption in the courtyard, they spotted Pinker standing at the door of the gatekeeper's hut, watching with interest. But the next morning, he was gone.
Jenna took note of the information just like during her acting studies.
Before long, the mysticism gathering concluded, and the participants departed in groups.
...
A few nights later, Lumian sat at the bar in Salle de Bal Brise, savoring his favorite absinthe and watching Jenna sing and dance.

Just then, Louis approached him and whispered in his ear, "Boss, the Big Boss is here. He's waiting for you at the café on the second floor."
"Boss came personally?" Lumian was slightly surprised.
Without saying a word, he downed the rest of the green liquid, stood up, and headed towards the stairs.
At that moment, Gardner Martin stood near the window, dressed casually in a dark brown jacket and a wide-brimmed hat, as if he had just come from the docks or the depot.
He looked at Lumian with his brownish-red eyes for a moment before motioning for the others to leave.
Soon, only Gardner Martin and Lumian remained in the café.
The Savoie Mob boss smiled and said, "I've expressed my admiration for you more than once, haven't I?"
"Indeed, thank you, Boss." Lumian nodded.
Gardner Martin's expression turned serious.
"Are you interested in joining my circle? This will allow you to come into contact with more Beyonders, stronger powers, and abundant resources."
Is that all for the audit? Lumian wondered, not hiding his puzzlement.
"What's the price?"
Gardner Martin smiled again.
"The price is that you might encounter more danger and have to follow orders to complete certain missions.
"However, as long as you do well, you will definitely progress rapidly. Perhaps in a few years, you can take my position."
Lumian pretended to hesitate and pondered for a moment before saying, "I don't have a problem with that."
Gardner Martin nodded solemnly.
"Before that, you need to undergo a test.
"Go to 13 Avenue du Marché now and stay there until the sun rises."
13 Avenue du Marché? Lumian frowned, doing his best to recall.
Finally, he remembered where that was.
Osta Trul, the Secrets Suppliant, considered it the most dangerous place in the market district.
It was the burned-down building that had yet to be demolished!

Chapter 280: The Knocker

As Lumian thought of 13 Avenue du Marché, his first instinct was that Gardner Martin intended to do him harm.

The place is abnormal, a mystery even to official Beyonders. *Why are you asking me to spend the night there?*

The image of the dark, charred building he had seen through the Mystery Prying Glasses still lingered in his mind, with a blurry face staring back at him through the empty eyes behind a window. It had given him an uneasy feeling, as Osta Trul had warned it was a dangerous place. However, Lumian had no interest in exploring it and wouldn't have triggered any anomalies due to him lacking an adventurous spirit, so he put it aside.

Amidst his thoughts, Lumian dismissed the idea that Gardner Martin would set a trap in the charred building to harm him.

As a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order—a secret organization—a powerful Beyonder likely at Sequence 5 or at minimum a 6, Gardner had other, more direct methods to deal with subordinates with ulterior motives.

Simultaneously, Lumian recalled everything he had seen and heard recently.

The charred building stood close to Rue des Blouses Blanches. Each time he passed it while going to his safe house from Salle de Bal Brise or searching for Franca, he would see vagrants seeking refuge from the rain inside. Never had he witnessed any official Beyonders or patrolling police shooing them away, nor had he heard of any fatalities occurring there.

For three reasons, Lumian considered the charred building highly perilous. Firstly, Osta Trul's spiritual perception had urged him. Secondly, its existence remained intact, as if some mysterious force prevented its demolition. Thirdly, his experience with the Mystery Prying Glasses had left him with a certain feeling.

Combining all these signs, Lumian couldn't help but think there was indeed a problem. And it wasn't some trivial matter either. Though under normal circumstances, these abnormalities were unlikely to be triggered; they required specific conditions.

But if there wasn't any trouble, why would Gardner Martin arrange for me to spend the night there? *Is it some kind of courage test?* That's pointless, Lumian thought to himself.

He believed that the most striking impression he left on Gardner Martin and the others was that of his boldness.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Lumian stared at Gardner Martin, showing his concern and suspicion.

"13 Avenue du Marché? I've heard there's something strange going

on there."
"If nothing were amiss, what kind of test would it be to send you there for a night?" Gardner Martin replied with a smile. "As long as your response is flawless, I believe you'll come out of it unscathed."
So, this is a test to see how I handle a 'sudden' abnormality without any prior information? Lumian nodded in understanding, but the situation left him even more puzzled.
If that's the case, why did Gardner Martin come here in the middle of the night and ask me to go to 13 Avenue du Marché immediately? Couldn't he have waited until daytime for me to do this? Then, he could test my ability to gather information and see who I'll contact...
Now, I won't have the chance to summon Madam Magician's messenger and seek her opinion or possible help, allowing me not to face the hidden danger of the charred building alone...
But Gardner Martin doesn't know that I can summon a demigod's messenger. That's probably not what he's worried about... If he suspects that I have another faction backing me, he wouldn't have given me a chance to infiltrate the core— in other words—the Iron and Blood Cross Order. He would have already found a way to make me completely 'disappear'...
Yes, if he really suspects me, he'll give me ample time to see where I go and who I contact to determine if there's a problem...
He must have some hidden motive for making things so urgent...
Giving me time to prepare means I might go back on my word. Instead of heading to 13 Avenue du Marché, I might turn around and sell information about this charred building's possible connection to the Iron and Blood Cross Order to the authorities?
But the problem is, even if I manage to stay until the sun rises, I can still go back on my word or betray them... I'll be apprehended right then and there and forced to sign a contract?
After careful consideration, Lumian still couldn't decipher Gardner Martin's true intentions.
The test was likely just one aspect, but there had to be a hidden motive!
The only thing Lumian was sure of was that Gardner Martin wasn't planning to kill him—at least not for the time being. This mission might be life-threatening, but the real danger lay elsewhere.
With various thoughts racing through his mind, Lumian finally made up his decision.
"Alright, I'll go now."
Gardner Martin grinned.
"Excellent. If you'd agreed too quickly, it would have disappointed

me.
"One of the most crucial traits for those who join our core is intelligence and the ability to think. Otherwise, why wouldn't I just purchase a few new steam robots from the God of Steam and Machinery Church?"
Are you suggesting that Franca is smart, but not very much so? She thinks, but not holistically? Lumian couldn't help but criticize inwardly.
Of course, he knew that this wasn't the reason why the Boss refused to let Franca join the core team.
After his inner critique, Lumian responded to Gardner Martin with a smile, "I'm looking forward to experiencing the core you've described, Boss."
As he spoke, he turned around and prepared to head downstairs to 13 Avenue du Marché.
Gardner Martin casually called out to him, "Don't reveal this to anyone, not even to those sleeping with you, like Jenna, who's singing downstairs."
"Alright," Lumian said, though he didn't give it much thought.
He had to share this with Franca and Jenna!
However, the two of them had been busy investigating the disappearance of the Deep Valley Cloister's gatekeeper and hadn't paid much attention to the affairs of the Savoie Mob.
After leaving Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian touched his left chest.
Then, he drew a triangular Sacred Emblem, as if praying to the God of Steam and Machinery for good luck.
There was still water on the ground from the rain. Lumian followed the iron-black street lamps and reached the intersection near Rue des Blouses Blanches at a moderate pace.
A pitch-black six-story building stood diagonally in front of him. Many of the walls had collapsed, as if pairs of empty, pitch-black "eyes" had grown out of the house.
At that moment, two or three tramps were sleeping on the ground floor, devoid of doors or window frames. It was strewn with blackened bricks and charred wood.
Lumian stood by the roadside and observed for a while, but he couldn't find the blurry face pressed against the window.
Must I wear the Mystery Prying Glasses to "see" it? Without hesitation, Lumian passed through the filthy doorway and entered the target building.
He felt no abnormalities from his body to his soul.
Walking around the tramps, Lumian found what appeared to be the activity room.
There was a small room inside. The wooden door was charred and

wobbly, but it remained intact. Beyond the shattered glass window lay an alley behind Avenue du Marché.
Lumian walked in and carefully closed the wooden door.
Then, he sat by the window, ready to climb out of the abnormal building at a moment's notice.
Amidst the inevitable torment, time ticked by, and the night deepened. Lumian remained oblivious to any abnormalities. It was so quiet that only the tramps' occasional coughs echoed.
Suddenly, he straightened his back.
He heard sluggish footsteps.
The footsteps drew nearer, knocking on the dilapidated wooden door that couldn't be locked, instantly tainting the quiet night with an uneasy atmosphere.
At that moment, Termiboros's magnificent voice echoed in Lumian's mind.
"Don't respond."
Don't respond... Lumian's hair stood on end.
Although he couldn't fully trust the Inevitability angel, considering the current situation, he chose to look at the door silently after weighing the pros and cons.
Knock! Knock! Knock!
The knocks on the door echoed one after another, the intervals long, slow, and heavy.
Knock! Knock! Knock!
After a while, the person outside finally spoke.
"Help me. I was the one sleeping outside.
"Help me, help me. A murderer has barged in!"
This fabrication is absurd... Lumian calmed his tense nerves by entertaining himself.
He didn't respond, acting as though there was no one in the small room.
The voice outside grew more intense, but the pace slowed. There was an indistinct, strange pause.
"He's. Here! He's. Here! I'm. About. To. Be. Killed!
"The next one. Is. You!"
As soon as he finished speaking, the person knocking on the door suddenly let out a scream.
Lumian heard a dull thud.
Thud! It was as if someone had fallen to the ground.
Then, a heavy object outside the door was slowly dragged further away.
Before long, a bone-chilling cutting sound filled the room, accompanied by the sound of gnawing and loud chewing.
An image suddenly surfaced in Lumian's mind: A shadowy figure

squatted on the ground, dividing a human corpse with an axe and other items. Occasionally, it would pick up an arm and take a few bites.
After a while, the similar commotion vanished.
Knock! Knock! Knock!
There was another knock on Lumian's small room.
"If you don't. Open the door. I'll. Come in. Myself." It was the same person who had asked for help.
Lumian gazed at the shaky wooden door and had an idea.
As long as I don't respond, the abnormality outside won't be able to open this door and truly threaten me?
This door is clearly unlocked and was burned by the fire. It's very fragile, but it can't open it...
It doesn't have the ability to open any door. Does it require a response from the person behind the door to establish a connection in the mystical sense?
As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian gained a deeper understanding of the current situation and felt more confident.
Knock. Knock. Knock. Amidst the knocking, the person outside spoke in a staccato manner, "I am not. Lying.
"I really will. Open the door. And come in.
"I'll give you. Another. Ten seconds."
Lumian scoffed, feeling increasingly certain.
He wanted to mock the other party in his heart and tell it to open if it had what it took, but he was worried that it would also be considered a response, so he suppressed those thoughts.
Knock! Knock! Knock!
Three more knocks separated by a long pause.
Suddenly, Lumian heard an inaudible creak.
Then, he saw the rickety wooden door slowly pull back, revealing a dark crack.
It was opening.

Chapter 281: Reflection

As the charred and decrepit wooden door creaked open slowly, Lumian felt a shiver down his spine, like ice water trickling over his scalp.

Wasn't it impossible to open the door?

Was my guess wrong?

If it could open the door, why did it take so long and talk so much?

Just get on with it! *Is there something wrong with its brain?*

Although Lumian had become a Pyromaniac and had experienced various dangerous situations, his heart couldn't help but race at this moment. It felt like a steam locomotive hurtling on tracks and pillowwood. If he weren't worried about Gardner Martin or other members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order lurking nearby, he would have set up an altar then and there, summoning Madam Magician's messenger or praying to Mr. Fool.

Instinctively, Lumian prepared to summon Fire Raven and create a cloak, readying himself for a battle. But Termiboros's warning echoed in his mind once more: Don't respond.

This was entirely different from just not opening the door! Lumian couldn't shake the feeling that something fishy was going on. Why would the creature knock on the door, threaten him, and then open it itself? So, he restrained himself, staying silent and staring at the door like a statue.

The charred wooden door continued to swing open, and the dark gap gradually widened, enough for one person to pass through. But there was nothing outside the door. The room, far from the window, was engulfed in darkness. The crimson moonlight seeping through the broken glass barely revealed any outlines.

Where was the fellow that knocked on the door? Lumian's first instinct was to activate his Spirit Vision to see if there was an invisible monster. But he held back, afraid that it would count as a response.

The wobbly door came to a halt, and nothing emerged from the darkness outside. No wriggling shapes, just silence. Lumian remained motionless in his sitting position, gazing in that direction. This whole situation was incredibly bizarre. He couldn't even target an enemy if he wanted to set them on fire.

Silence took over, and time seemed to stand still. Then suddenly, a drop of liquid fell from the ceiling, landing in front of Lumian. His eyelids twitched, and under the crimson moonlight, he saw that it was bright red, resembling blood.

Drip. Drip. Blood dripped, gradually staining a large area red.

Lumian couldn't shake the unease that crept over him.

Drip!
Another droplet landed on Lumian's right cheek. It was cold, sticky, and silky. It didn't seem like human blood, but it wasn't tainted by darkness either. The pungent smell of blood filled Lumian's nostrils, making him want to roll to the side, stand up, and leap out of the window instinctively.
Don't respond. He recalled Termiboros's words once again.
Lumian took a deep breath, allowing the viscous liquid that smelled like blood to hit his face and head. Gradually, he felt his body grow heavier. He quickly examined his exposed hands.Cold, viscous blood dripped onto his hands, silently merging into one, as if encasing him in a blood-colored glove.
Lumian began to suspect that he was trapped in a mucous blood membrane, making him feel heavier and heavier. Instinctively, he thought about reaching into his pocket to pull out Mr. K's finger. He wanted the Aurora Order Oracle, skilled in blood-related spells, to help him resist this strange mucous blood membrane.
"Don't respond." This time, the Inevitability angel's powerful voice echoed in Lumian's mind, instead of him reminding himself of Termiboros's earlier warning.
Lumian managed to regain control of himself, but he could feel his body growing heavier, and his breathing became labored. Slowly, the strange blood began to seep into his skin, as if it had a life of its own, determined to enter his body and consume him from the inside out.
As the blood infiltrated him, his thoughts grew hazy, and a surge of violent tendencies flooded his mind. The urge to kill and burn everything—this place, Trier, the entire world—overwhelmed him!
Dammit! Could Termiboros be using this opportunity to deceive me and use the strange power here to take control and escape the seal.
He couldn't help but question the effectiveness of Termiboros's "don't respond" and the true intentions of the Inevitability angel.
Despite wanting to resist and break free from the burned-down building, Lumian couldn't shake the feeling that there was something mystical about the "abnormality" and the creature's persistence in knocking, talking, and asking for permission.
If he hadn't harbored those suspicions, he wouldn't have fully trusted Termiboros, an enemy rather than a friend. He wouldn't have endured until now. With these thoughts swirling in his mind, Lumian decided to hold on a little longer and observe what would happen next.
His head felt heavy, and his thoughts grew increasingly chaotic. A grinding sound rang in his ears, and his body seemed to ache from a distant pain. It was as if he was slipping into a semi-conscious

state, while someone took the opportunity to dismember him, severing his limbs and tearing his body apart.
Then, suddenly, Lumian's consciousness withdrew. It was as if his spirit had separated from his body. He watched himself sitting by the window, covered in blood, with his eyes strangely empty. In front of him squatted a charred figure, brandishing a bloodied axe and hacking at his thigh, splitting the bone in half.
Uh... Lumian slowly realized that something was amiss.
He instinctively looked down and saw that his body remained whole!
He was still sitting by the shattered window, but the scene he witnessed was no longer the crumbling charred wooden door. Instead, he saw a "reflection" of his surroundings and his own dismemberment by the burnt shadow.
Compared to his severed legs and extracted bones, the most striking aspect was his empty, lifeless eyes.
After a brief daze, the horrifying and bloody vision disappeared, and the open, dilapidated wooden door returned to his sight.
He knew it wasn't an illusion because he felt as if he had surfaced from water, and his entire body relaxed.
If I had responded, what would have happened? *Would the nightmarish scenes I saw have become real?* Would that response have established a mystical connection, allowing those terrifying and almost illusionary encounters to materialize? Lumian exhaled slowly, fear still lingering in his heart.
He placed his hand on his left chest, lowered his voice, and chuckled.
"Temiboros, you truly are remarkable."
Indeed, a worthy angel. Even in His sealed state, He easily discerned the essence of the abnormality.
Termiboros's voice echoed, overlapping as if from multiple sources. "The abnormality here is considered minor."
"Minor?" Lumian couldn't believe it. "If you hadn't reminded me not to respond and if I hadn't been determined enough, something terrible might have occurred. That Gardner Martin, that vile scoundrel, really wants me dead!"
Termiboros replied in a thunderous voice, "You won't die. The abnormality will merely transform you, leading your thoughts to become fanatical about certain things while rejecting others."
Lumian pondered the explanation, finding it a bit hard to grasp.
Just then, Termiboros added, "It's like being conquered, both physically and mentally."
Suddenly, realization dawned on Lumian, and he spoke quietly, "Gardner Martin wanted me to stay here overnight so he could use

this anomaly to control me and eliminate any potential threats.
No wonder he came to Salle de Bal Brise so late and didn't give me time to think!
Termiboros confirmed Lumian's suspicion, "Have you only just realized how shallow you are?"
Lumian cursed under his breath and thought to himself, Even if he succeeds, I won't be under Gardner Martin's control; I'll be manipulated by the power of this place. Isn't he worried that something might go wrong?
The abnormality here is connected to the Iron and Blood Cross Order. *Is he not concerned about that?*
With these thoughts swirling in his mind, Lumian furrowed his brow and asked Termiboros, "Since I won't be affected or altered abnormally, will Gardner Martin notice something off about me when I leave tomorrow morning?"
Termiboros's voice boomed.
"If such a level of corruption was easily detectable, Gardner Martin and his allies would have been eliminated by the official Beyonders long ago.
"Unless the source of corruption provides direct information, they can't tell that you're unaffected."
Hmm... As Lumian contemplated the situation, he suddenly realized a hidden truth in Termiboros's words—Gardner Martin and the members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order were already corrupted!
They were under someone else's control!
Hiss... The more Lumian thought about it, the more he found it terrifying.
After a few seconds, Lumian tried to get more information from Termiboros, asking, "When I meet Gardner Martin, how should I display my fanaticism, and which beliefs should I reject?"
Termiboros surprisingly replied, "Show fanaticism towards war and chaos and reject belief in other deities."
Lumian nodded, but another concern arose. "Considering the intensity of the recent abnormality, shouldn't everyone who enters and stays here be corrupted?"
Termiboros clarified, "Only two specific pathways inevitably trigger the abnormality here. The rest require specific actions at precise times before the anomaly will occur. The officials only recognize the latter situation and secretly prevent others from entering this building at those specific times."
"Two special pathways... Hunter and Demoness?" Lumian could roughly guess.
Termiboros didn't deny it.

As Lumian recalled the entire incident, he couldn't help but smile, saying, "Termiboros, it seems you've truly understood your situation and positioned yourself wisely."

Termiboros remained silent this time, providing no response.

In the following hours, Lumian encountered two more abnormalities. One almost broke his neck, while the other caused an explosion that sent his organs flying.

Remembering the words "don't respond," he endured the trials, eventually returning to his unharmed body.

Finally, a tinge of reddish-gold appeared on the horizon as the sun rose. Lumian stood up, basking in the morning light for a moment before leaving 13 Avenue du Marché.

There, he saw Gardner Martin sitting in a carriage opposite. Their eyes met, and in the next moment, Gardner Martin smiled.

Lumian smiled back.

Chapter 282: Treacherous

Gardner Martin stepped out of the carriage and warmly embraced Lumian.

Oh, his attitude changed instantly... Lumian criticized as he returned the hug. After the embrace, Gardner Martin let go and smiled, declaring, "From now on, we're true brothers."

True brothers? Can I inherit your estate if you die? Lumian, whose mental state had improved significantly and had successfully passed the difficult "test," held back his teasing thoughts.

"You're still my boss," Lumian said, his habitual loyalty shining through in his words.

He thought that while it might have been a bit over the top, the gesture didn't feel insincere or out of place.

Gardner Martin laughed.

"In the future, when there's nobody else around, you can call me 'CO Sir.'"

"CO Sir..." Lumian found the title a little strange.

The Iron and Blood Cross Order was a secret organization, not an army.

Gardner Martin didn't offer any explanation; he just smiled.

"Come to 11 Rue des Fontaines at 8 p.m. tonight. That's when your initiation ritual will take place."

With that, he gave Lumian's shoulder a reassuring pat.

"Rest well now."

Lumian acknowledged his words with a nod and bid farewell to the boss of the Savoie Mob. He made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré and drew the curtains of Room 207.

It was already past 6 a.m., so Lumian didn't need to catch up on sleep. He sat at the wooden table and began writing to Madam Magician. He recounted the previous night's encounter and Termiboros's performance. Finally, he inquired about how to report this matter to Mr. K.

Alone, Lumian couldn't avoid the peculiar "abnormality" in the abandoned building. He needed to explain the situation convincingly to Mr. K without revealing that he possessed The Fool's seal and an angel from the Inevitability domain.

After neatly folding the letter, Lumian set up a ritual and summoned the "doll" messenger in the light-gold dress.

The messenger lowered her head and nodded with satisfaction upon seeing the square-shaped letter.

As she levitated the letter, she warned Lumian, "Someone is still monitoring you."

Huh? I didn't notice it at all... His tracking, concealment, and

observation skills are impressive... Lumian prided himself on being a skilled Hunter with strong anti-tracking abilities. Yet, he had failed to detect the presence of the monitors!

Mr. K's subordinates? No, if Miss Messenger felt the need to warn me, it couldn't be the Aurora Order... The monitors sent by Gardner Martin must still be lurking, even after passing the test and facing that abnormal corruption last night. I've let my guard down after being informed about my induction, and that's made me vulnerable... Damn, how cunning! Lumian realized he had been too naive and not cautious enough compared to Gardner Martin.

If he hadn't pretended to be exhausted from sleep deprivation and torture, drawing the curtains to sleep would've been an obvious red flag. It would have definitely raised suspicion among the monitors.

At the same time, Lumian was grateful that Madam Magician's messenger seemed powerful enough not to be detected by the monitors.

After sending off the "doll" messenger, Lumian lay on the bed, waiting for a reply. When it finally arrived, he read the message carefully.

"As a secret organization with a history spanning two to three centuries, the Iron and Blood Cross Order doesn't recruit members so readily. The fact that they are allowing new members to be corrupted goes against the test I know of.

"It appears that the Iron and Blood Cross Order has undergone some negative changes over the years. Don't rush to uncover the reasons behind this just yet. Take it step by step and focus on protecting yourself for now.

"When Termiboros offered help and warned you, it was likely because He didn't want you to be corrupted or perish outright. That would have an impact on Him. At the same time, He probably wants to earn your trust before revealing His true intentions at a critical moment.

"Always remember that an evil god's angel is a true madman. He will surely bring disaster to you and those around you. Stay vigilant at all times. You must both use Him to your advantage and guard against His treachery.

"As for Mr. K, it's simple. Just explain that you recited that entity's honorific name at a crucial moment, and miraculously, you remained untainted.

"Don't worry about him verifying the authenticity of your claim with that entity. Devout believers wouldn't do such a thing. Besides, even the entity Himself might not be certain if He responded to your prayers."

Wh— Lumian felt a bit bewildered by the last part.

How could a deity not know if He had responded to a specific believer?
Isn't that too absurd?
In an instant, Lumian recalled something Madam Magician had once told him.
If he used anything other than the three-line honorific name to pray to Mr. Fool, she couldn't guarantee that the response would be from that great being. It could be very dangerous.
Something similar to this situation? Matters involving deities are truly unfathomable. And any mistake could lead to a situation more tragic than death... *Could Aurore have faced the same problem?* Lumian's thoughts drifted.
For the past few days, he had meticulously combed through Aurore's grimoires, copying everything from the two highlighted time periods that Madame Justice had pointed out. His plan was to show it to the vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Madam Hela, when the opportunity arose.
Franca had already read through the corresponding content and found no suspicious details. The unconventional mysticism knowledge was just ordinary spells that could only be cast by a Warlock or Beyonder of the corresponding domain. Neither of them could practice it.
The only issue they found was that since the beginning of the year, Aurore's grimoires had gained a significant amount of ritualistic knowledge related to sacrificial rituals and secret deeds. These were obtained from the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, but they didn't point to any evil god or hidden existence. They were more basic applications.
A crimson flame engulfed the letter, turning it to ash in Lumian's hand.
He lay down and pretended to sleep, but his mind was busy contemplating the grimoires and planning his next steps.
The most important thing to him was that the one-month deadline set by the Prophecy Spell was approaching. Guillaume Bénet, the padre, would appear somewhere in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge.
...
In the hill district, at the entrance of Deep Valley Cloister.
Franca, dressed as a typical bounty hunter with a fake mustache and a top hat, sighed to Jenna,
"There's really no clue at all."
Jenna was disguised in a white shirt, brown vest, dark pants, and black boots, with a brown beret. She had altered her features slightly to look more ordinary, without any moles or smoky

makeup.
As they gazed at the peculiar iron-black building with steel components and massive chimneys resembling steeples, it felt more like a special factory than the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery cloister.
At that moment, white smoke billowed from the chimneys, accompanied by a loud mechanical roar.
"It's mainly because those monks don't want to interact with outsiders..." Jenna replied, feeling frustrated.
For the past few days, they, like other bounty hunters and private detectives, were only allowed to enter the first-floor courtyard. They could only inquire with the new gatekeeper and a few other servants.
The ascetic monks only provided a list of relevant personnel's statements.
Franca diverted her gaze and clicked her tongue.
"This won't be an easy case. Otherwise, the official Beyonders would have figured it out by now.
"Since we can't find any clues in the cloister, let's take a look around."
"Alright." Jenna lacked experience in such investigations and was still learning from Franca.
They strolled around the cloister in the valley, occasionally encountering other investigators drawn by the high bounty.
After about fifteen minutes of walking, they came across a mountain wall showing signs of collapse and new trees growing.
On the side of the mountain wall, there was a cave sealed by a heavy wooden door. A man in his forties sat beside it, seeking shelter from the wind and rain.
He flipped through old newspapers with comic strips, occasionally chuckling. A brass key hung from his waist.
Franca approached and asked in a deliberate hoarse voice, "What's this place?"
The plain-looking, slightly ragged man glanced up at Franca's face and frowned a bit.
His gaze quickly shifted to Jenna, and he seemed more at ease.
"This is the entrance to the Deep Valley Quarry.
"I'm a gatekeeper."
"Why is there a door, and why is it locked?" Jenna had seen a real quarry south of the market district.
"This place is abandoned and could collapse anytime. We can't allow anyone daring enough to disturb a sleeping tiger," the gatekeeper of the Deep Valley Quarry explained with a smile.
"Is this place not connected to Underground Trier?" Franca

inquired.
The quarry's gatekeeper shook his head.
"It's on the verge of complete collapse. How could it be connected? I'm about to lose my job!"
With that, he looked at Jenna and tried to be friendly.
"Do you want some work? I'll pay you to have some fun with me—just once."
"You Trierians..." Franca tutted and shook her head.
Jenna responded with her usual catchphrase, rejecting his proposition.
...
8 p.m., 11 Rue des Fontaines.
Lumian followed Gardner Martin's butler, Faustino, across the lawn and through the hall until they reached a windowless room.
Inside, there was a dining table, but it didn't resemble a lavish villa restaurant. Instead, it appeared quite plain, almost empty.
Lumian glanced around and noticed three rows of dishes neatly arranged on the table. The first row held various utensils, the second row contained cups and bottles, and the third row displayed prepared dishes and unlit candles.
The setup was meticulously symmetrical, forming three parallel lines.

Chapter 283: Idea

Gardner Martin's butler, Faustino, didn't leave the room after guiding Lumian in. Instead, he opened his arms with a smile.

"Welcome, new brother."

You're also a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order? Lumian was taken aback at first, but then he accepted it as a matter of fact.

A butler, as the master's eyes, ears, and limbs, likely knew many of Gardner Martin's secrets. So it made sense that he either promoted Faustino to be a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order or had a member of the Order become his butler.

Lumian observed Faustino's slightly gray temples, sunken eyes, and light-blue eyes, then embraced him warmly.

"Thank you."

Faustino, dressed in his butler attire, went to the dining table and pulled out a chair at the west end, saying to Lumian, "Sit here."

Lumian nodded and settled down, feeling strangely at home.

Of course, thanks to Aurore's education, he had avoided the habit of raising his legs and crossing them at the edge of the dining table.

Faustino seated himself beside Lumian and briefly explained, "A few more brothers will come later."

Fifteen minutes later, the rest of the Iron and Blood Cross Order members arrived. Following Faustino's introductions, Lumian embraced each one.

They were:

Vincent Lorraine, representing Gardner Martin in the Rist dock operations, was under 30 years old with a typical Intis look—black hair, blue eyes, refined appearance, and slender figure. He didn't strike Lumian as a Beyonder of the Hunter pathway as he didn't differ much from ordinary white-collar workers, but that begged the question—how did he survive the vigil?

Parsifal, who helped Gardner Martin manage the depot and freight company, appeared as an average middle-aged man with slightly disheveled brown hair and amiable brown eyes when he smiled. However, his emotionless gaze gave Lumian chills, making him wary.

Not in charge of specific matters, Albus seemed to operate in the dark and had a hint of red in his hair. His sharp brown eyebrows and eyes made him rather handsome, but he had a less likable appearance.

There was also an acquaintance of Lumian's, "Blood Palm" Black of the Savoie Mob.

As the manager of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, he was dressed formally, had brown hair and blue eyes, and enjoyed a cigar with a warm smile.
Lumian had suspected that the Savoie Mob had an official member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order secretly monitoring the market district and their activities. However, he hadn't expected it to be "Blood Palm" Black, who didn't stand out at all.
Lumian had initially thought it might be Baron Brignais or "Rat" Christo, but it turned out differently.
Strangely, Black bore a resemblance to Gardner Martin.
With Faustino and Lumian, there were now six members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order present.
In the past, Lumian had criticized, "Isn't it too much for a regional mob like the Savoie Mob to have five or six Beyonders?" But now, he found it unsurprising.
As a secret organization with a long history, it was normal for the Iron and Blood Cross Order to have such influence and heritage. Even its subsidiaries enjoyed abundant resources.
After exchanging pleasantries, Butler Faustino introduced the items on the table to Lumian.
"In the ensuing ritual, the goblets will be our weapons. They can also be used as cannons. Red wine will be ordinary explosives, white wine will be potent explosives, food will be the components, and knives and forks will be sharp swords..."
Lumian listened quietly, wondering if there was something odd about their thinking.
Are they too self-aware?
Or is there some mystical significance to this?
By the time Faustino finished speaking, Gardner Martin, now wearing his tailcoat and an Iron Cross medal embedded with a ruby over his chest, entered the room.
He stood on the east side of the long dining table, facing the six seated members on the west side.
With a swoosh, the five members, excluding Lumian, stood up in unison.
Oh... Lumian inwardly sighed as he rose to his feet.
"Good evening, CO Sir." Faustino, Black, and the others greeted him in unison. Lumian was slightly slower to respond.
Gardner Martin motioned for everyone to take their seats and smiled.
"We'll officially begin the ritual when the Supervisor arrives.
"Ciel, let me tell you what the core you're about to join represents."
Gardner Martin locked eyes with Lumian, his tone growing more serious.

"We are all members of a secretive organization with a history spanning centuries.
"It's known as the Iron and Blood Cross Order."
Lumian didn't show any intentional surprise or dismay. After all, the name sounded rather ordinary.
Albus, the young man with dark-red hair sitting at the edge of the dining table, seemed about to speak, but Gardner Martin shot him a stern look.
The Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order turned his attention back to Lumian.
"Nearly 300 years ago, a few influential figures established the Iron and Blood Cross Order. They believed that deities were merely powerful Beyonders, and no matter how you look at it, even the weakest Beyonder is fundamentally different from ordinary people.
"Our philosophy is that regardless of how one obtains Beyonder powers, they should be recognized and treated with a status above ordinary people. However, the two Churches and the government only acknowledge the Beyonders they nurture. They also insist that supernatural powers should be concealed from ordinary folks as much as possible.
"This goes against nature and the course of history. We must change it.
"This also means we have to oppose the government and the two Churches, but there's no need to fear. We possess sufficient strength and true demigods.
"In the future, if the two Churches are willing to accept wild Beyonders and acknowledge their statuses, we might consider cooperating with them."
In other words, the ultimate goal is to overthrow the government and establish a country where Beyonders hold positions at all levels? Lumian interpreted Gardner Martin's words from his own perspective.
Gardner Martin glanced at the six members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order seated opposite him and smiled once more.
"Our Iron and Blood Cross Order's strength is mainly concentrated in Intis, with over a third of our members based in Trier. As you can see, we have many powerful brothers in the market district alone, and even more Beyonders under our control.
"I am the CO, or Commanding Officer, responsible for leading you and handling various matters in the market district. Above me are several branch presidents, also referred to as 'Deputy Brigade Commanders.' Each of them is a true and powerful demigod.
"Above the branch presidents is our Iron and Blood Cross Order's

president, also known as the Brigade Commander. He is a mysterious and formidable figure.
"Below me are NCOs. When we have more than ten brothers in the market district, I'll appoint two NCOs to assist me in management. NCOs receive additional resources and support."
Is this some kind of military game? Lumian guessed from the titles of the different levels within the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
Gardner Martin turned his gaze to the door and spoke, "Apart from that, we also have many Supervisors. Each Supervisor acts independently and patrols the areas under the jurisdiction of different commanding officers.
"In the future, if anything happens to me and I exhibit any abnormalities, you must find the Supervisor immediately and report the situation to him. Similarly, if you discover that the Supervisor has done something abnormal, inform me immediately."
Gardner Martin grinned playfully at Lumian and said, "Ciel, let me introduce you to Olson, the Supervisor in charge of the market district."
Perplexed, Lumian followed Gardner Martin's finger and looked at the door.
In the next moment, a tall, thin man in a blue vest and black suit entered the room.
The man had short auburn hair, reddish-brown eyes, thick eyebrows, and a wild beard. He resembled a famished bear.
As Lumian recognized Supervisor Olson, his pupils widened.
It was the trader he, Christo, and Simon had encountered underground!
Lumian vividly remembered that he had been nothing but a head and a blood-stained spine. He had been pursued by another headless monster, both of which were extremely dangerous. Yet, here he was, underground and appearing at Gardner Martin's house!
Lumian couldn't help but glance at Olson's hands, noticing his fair skin and the small suitcase he carried.
He has a body again? Has he merged with the headless monster? Lumian's mind raced as he observed Olson approaching Gardner Martin.
He began to suspect that the two monsters they had encountered during the transaction were illusions created by Olson. There was nothing abnormal about him.
Since the transaction had been a test, it wasn't surprising that the monster had been fake.
But was it not too realistic? Lumian watched with suspicion as

Gardner Martin and Olson each took a goblet and addressed everyone present, "Load the explosives!"
Albus, Parsifal, and the other members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order placed a goblet in front of them and poured alluring red wine into them.
So this is how you load explosives? Lumian recalled Faustino's words about goblets being weapons or cannons, and wine being explosives.
After filling the "cannons" with "explosives," Gardner Martin called out, "Attention!
"Port arms!"
In an instant, everyone stood up and placed their right hands on the goblets filled with red wine.
"Present arms!" Gardner Martin gave another command.
In unison, he raised the goblet to his chest.
Lumian marveled and followed suit, imitating the actions of the other members around him.

Chapter 284: Entering the Order

Gardner Martin observed the Iron and Blood Cross Order members opposite him and nodded with satisfaction.

"Aim!"

At this command, Faustino and the others raised their goblets to their lips.

Is this what aiming means? Lumian almost laughed, but the seriousness of the other Iron and Blood Cross Order members stopped him.

He had grasped the essence of the ritual and had an idea of what would happen next.

Just then, Gardner Martin issued a new order.

"Fire!"

Almost simultaneously, Parsifal, Black, and the others downed a third of the red wine in their goblets.

"Fire!"

Gardner Martin called out the word again.

Lumian lifted his head slightly and downed another third of the red wine.

Gardner Martin followed suit.

He then continued, "Attack!"

The Iron and Blood Cross Order members present finished the remaining red wine.

Gardner Martin removed the goblet from his mouth with a serious expression.

"Ground arms!"

As he spoke, he raised the goblet above his eyes, pressed it against his forehead, and then placed it back on the dining table.

Vincent Lorraine and the others followed suit.

Then, they straightened their backs, slapped their left chests with their right hands, and shouted together, "War! War! War!"

As they shouted in unison, Lumian felt a subtle shift in the room's atmosphere, as if it had been filled with enthusiasm, excitement, and passion.

The atmosphere infected the Iron and Blood Cross Order members, connecting their hearts and minds, making them feel like true brothers.

Even without being influenced by any abnormality or fanatical thoughts, Lumian couldn't help but be affected by the environment and atmosphere. He felt a surge of excitement[1].

He had previously criticized the initiation ritual of the Iron and Blood Cross Order for lacking mystique and not living up to the title of a secret organization. Now, he realized that it was merely

different in quality from the Aurora Order.
Besides, the more mystical part was the vigil at 13 Avenue du Marché.
Gardner Martin gestured with his right hand, prompting Faustino, Albus, and the others to stop and fall silent.
He smiled once again and said, "Let us welcome our new brother, Lumian Lee!"
This time, he used Lumian's real name, indicating that the Iron and Blood Cross Order knew the members' situations very well.
The Iron and Blood Cross Order members, including Supervisor Olson, applauded one after another. Lumian stood up and poured himself a goblet of red wine, which he downed in one gulp as a sign of respect.
This fully showcased his characteristics as a regular customer of Ol' Tavern.
"Very good. We're all brothers. There's no need to stand on ceremony," Gardner said as he took a seat. While Faustino distributed plates and cut bread, Gardner smiled and continued, "I've already explained the history and philosophy of our Iron and Blood Cross Order. Now, let's talk about what we want to do."
His smile vanished as he grew more serious.
"The most important thing we've always been working towards is to overthrow the current government, establish a country ruled by Beyonders, and transform this world. For this, we've been plotting and experimenting. We've established multiple branch organizations to prepare for chaos.
"Specifically, as for me, I'll use companies and mobs to control dockworkers, construction workers, porters, handymen, and laborers in the market district. When necessary, I'll let them take to the streets and use barricades to fight the police and army."
Lumian furrowed his brow and asked in confusion, "Isn't it said that Beyonders are fundamentally different from ordinary people? Beyonders are superior to ordinary people. Why make controlling and using workers a goal?"
He found it ironic that the Iron and Blood Cross Order's philosophy and actions were completely inconsistent.
Although this could be considered normal—concepts were concepts and slogans were slogans—and they couldn't be equated to reality, Gardner Martin could always address these matters at a later time. It didn't feel right for his words to contradict himself just seconds later.
If he hadn't just joined this secret organization, Lumian's tone would have been even more mocking.
Gardner Martin grinned.

"Very perceptive. You've noticed a very important problem.
"Before this, only Albus suggested it. Everyone else naturally accepted it."
Not only is he using ordinary people to create chaos, but he also has other intentions? Lumian turned his head to glance at Albus, who was sitting at the edge of the dining table. He realized that the dark-red-haired young man's posture was rather casual. His right leg was crossed, and he kept shaking his ankle.
Gardner Martin explained simply, "First, you need to understand something. Why did those deities establish Churches and spread Their teachings?
"You probably don't buy the words 'God loves the world.' If They truly had love, the market district wouldn't be like this, and Intis wouldn't have so many tramps."
Lumian agreed with this. He nodded slightly and didn't interrupt the Commanding Officer.
Gardner Martin smiled and said, "We reckon that deities require believers, and we've proven this over the centuries.
"The more common folk we influence, the greater our resources to strike fear into the hearts of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church and the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery. This'll weaken their support for the current government and boost our chances during the riots.
"Eventually, it'll become a crucial bargaining chip to make them agree to us, if not outright support us."
"They're all just bargaining chips..." Lumian's eyes flickered.
The people he knew and interacted with were distinct individuals —unique families.
Gardner Martin let out a sigh.
"If we aim to control more workers and citizens, we need the government and the National Convention to cooperate with us.
"I've always known what kind of person Hugues Artois is and the forces behind him, but I still decided to support his bid for parliament. I knew he'd inevitably create plenty of chaos in the market district. Being associated with the National Convention and the government, the worse he performed, the more people would flock to our side. Unfortunately, this piece of trash was assassinated just a few days after being elected."
So, that's why the Savoie Mob supports Hugues Artois... I thought there was an evil god backing you, and the evil gods all support Hugues Artois... Lumian realized.
Without Gardner Martin's personal explanation and a proper understanding of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's philosophy, Lumian couldn't possibly fathom the secret organization's true

intentions behind supporting Hugues Artois's candidacy for parliament.
Gardner Martin summarized, "Hence, in the market district, we place great importance on docks, depots, warehouses, freight companies, and construction firms. The Savoie Mob's purpose is to interact with various individuals and gather crucial information, all while contributing to the organization's funds.
"Naturally, mobs also serve as a vital tool to control ordinary people."
No wonder he poured so many resources into the Savoie Mob... Lumian glanced at the intense "Blood Glove" Black and inwardly mocked him for being better at acting than himself.
Haven't you heard the Boss's words countless times? *Why are you still looking so focused?*
Look at Albus, constantly eating, drinking, and shaking his leg.
After Lumian nodded, Gardner Martin took a sip of red wine and said, "One more thing we're doing is exploring the underground to find the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier."
Lumian couldn't help but glance at the silent Supervisor Olson.
The lanky man, looking like a hungry bear, was slicing a medium-rare steak and devouring the juicy meat.
Lumian's eyes scanned Olson's neck several times, but there were no signs of sutures.
Could it be that the state of having only his head and spine is just an illusion created by some power? Lumian wondered to himself.
However, this was in line with the legend of Bansy Harbor!
Either Olson has a deep understanding of the unforeseen events in Bansy Harbor, or he encountered similar monsters elsewhere...
Even if it's an illusion, it can't be something he imagined. It must be based on his experience and knowledge...
Madam Magician said most of his words were likely true. She even suspected that he disappeared for a few months because he entered Fourth Epoch Trier...
Where did he encounter a monster with only its head and spine?
If he already entered Fourth Epoch Trier, why is Gardner Martin still searching for the entrance? *Is Madam Magician's suspicion off?* Lumian's thoughts raced as he made a series of guesses.
Looking at Gardner Martin, he asked in confusion, "Why search for Fourth Epoch Trier's entrance?"
Gardner Martin grinned.
"To other Beyonders, it's hell, an abyss. It's a calamity they can't approach, but to Hunters, it represents a massive treasure trove.
"And our Iron and Blood Cross Order is dominated by Beyonders of the Hunter pathway."

"A treasure trove?" Lumian thought of the Tree of Shadow and the invisible sea of flames that could incinerate a portion of the tree roots.

Gardner Martin continued, speaking solemnly, "I don't know how much you know about the history of the Fourth Epoch, but I can tell you that in that era, deities once walked the earth, and angels often appeared. It was known as the Age of the Gods.

"In the Northern Continent, there were three powerful countries during the Age of the Gods, and one of them was the Tudor Empire. Its capital, Trier, had sunk underground.

"The Tudor Empire's Emperor, Alista Tudor, was known as the Blood Emperor. He was a true deity who controlled the Hunter pathway!

"He perished in a battle of gods. His remains are in Fourth Epoch Trier!"

Blood Emperor Tudor's remains? Lumian instantly recalled some of the contents of Aurore's grimoires. Aurore didn't delve deeply into the history of the Fourth Epoch, only having a rough understanding. She mentioned the Solomon Empire, the Trunsoest Empire, and the Tudor Empire. She also mentioned titles like the Blood Emperor, the Night Emperor, the Emperor of the Underworld, the Black Emperor, and the War of the Four Emperors. According to Aurore's description, the Blood Emperor was as powerful as a deity.

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1. Adapted from a ritual conducted by the Les Neuf Sœurs. ↩

Chapter 285: Maxim

The Blood Emperor's remains, the remains of a deity... Does it hold the Beyonder characteristic of Sequence 0? No wonder the Iron and Blood Cross Order dreams of entering Fourth Epoch Trier...

But what's this got to do with me? As a Sequence 7, I don't even dare think about becoming a demigod. Advancing to a Sequence 6 Conspirer is beyond my consideration for now. All I can focus on is digesting the Pyromaniac potion. I've got nothing better to do than contemplate High-Sequences or deity-related items!

Besides, Madam Magician warned that such items always come with negative effects. Tsk, negative effects involving godhood can easily kill me...

Lumian, with vast knowledge of high-end mysticism, remained unfazed by Gardner Martin's provocation. Thoughts raced through his mind, and he sneered inwardly.

Looking at Gardner Martin, he asked innocently, "If Fourth Epoch Trier truly contains the remains of The Blood Emperor Tudor, why didn't the Eternal Blazing Sun and God of Steam and Machinery Church take it away instead of leaving it for our Iron and Blood Cross Order?

"Even if only Hunters can enter safely, it's just a matter of time before they nurture a High-Sequence Hunter with the resources they have. The Fifth Epoch has been around for over 1,300 years."

Gardner Martin fell silent for two seconds before responding, "There are other factors restraining them, but they won't be a problem for us.

"I'll tell you all the details once we find the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier."

Isn't that just saying, "I don't know why, but we have to give it a try?" Uh, maybe the Boss knows the reason, but he's afraid of scaring us if he reveals it. He can't directly tell the present members that there are many dangers hidden underground that even deities can't resolve—the kind that requires rebuilding a Trier above the Fourth Epoch ruins as a seal. That's why the two Churches won't attempt to enter. Heh heh, who would dare to go underground when they're not seriously corrupted? Lumian tried his best to control his gaze and posture, so as not to show any air of superiority.

Compared to the members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order here, him having a rough understanding of the underground situation and having seen the Invisible Sea of Fire, the Tree of Shadow, and the bizarre catacombs indeed made him qualified to be superior.

Of course, he had no idea how well Commanding Officer Gardner

Martin and Supervisor Olson knew about the underground situation.
Perhaps the latter, suspected to have entered Fourth Epoch Trier, knew more secrets.
Gardner Martin didn't continue discussing the Blood Emperor and the Fourth Epoch. Instead, he turned to Lumian and asked, "Is there anything you need these days?"
Oh, are you about to hand out the membership perks? Lumian's spirits lifted as he replied with sincerity, "I'm in need of a mystical item with peculiar properties to compensate for my deficiencies in Beyonder powers.
"And if there are no relevant mystical items available, perhaps you could provide me with the corresponding Beyonder... ingredients. I'll try to find an Artisan to craft them."
He had almost mentioned the term "Beyonder characteristics" but quickly changed it to "Beyonder ingredients" after a pause, feigning embarrassment.
Though people often spoke of Beyonder characteristics at Trier's mysticism gathering, they usually referred to the fusion of two main potion ingredients.
Of course, some people had long discovered that Beyonders were also Beyonder creatures, capable of producing ingredients for potion concoction, hinting at the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility.
Typically, Lumian's mention of Beyonder characteristics wouldn't attract suspicion or attention, but he needed to be cautious not to arouse suspicion from a Conspirer like Gardner Martin.
"Heh, you really dare to ask?" Albus mocked Lumian, shaking his feet with crossed legs.
Even Parsifal, Vincent Lorraine, and the others wore strange expressions.
None of them had dared to make such a bold request when they joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
Undeterred, Lumian sneered back at Albus, "Why not? I'm not like some piece of trash who can't handle a reward. What the organization gives me today, I'll repay tenfold in the future!"
With a whoosh, Albus lowered his right leg and glared at Lumian with fiery intensity, clearly displeased with his response.
The others, except for Faustino who maintained his butler demeanor, also showed discontent.
Lumian's snide remark had included them as well.
"Enough," Gardner Martin intervened, smiling at Lumian. "As the Commanding Officer, I must be fair. I can't grant you a mystical item right now, as others will protest. But don't worry; our Iron

and Blood Cross Order is not stingy. Once you complete a few missions and accumulate enough merit, I'll provide you with a few mystical items to choose from.
"Meanwhile, before each mission, suitable mystical items will be temporarily provided to the participating members, ensuring their safety and mission completion."
Lumian nodded, accepting the response. He hadn't expected much, but he still made the request in case Gardner Martin was in a generous mood.
After a brief consideration, Gardner Martin added, "I'll inform René that the advance you received was my reward to you. You'll still get your share from Salle de Bal Brise in the future."
"Thank you, CO Sir," Lumian expressed his joy openly.
This meant his membership door gift was 12,000 verl d'or, a significant sum.
Hence, most of the money he spent on advancing to Pyromaniac came from the Aurora Order and the Iron and Blood Cross Order's "financing." His gratitude was genuine, as he had only contributed less than a third of the expenses himself.
Gardner Martin cut into a medium steak, chewing and swallowing before asking, "Any other questions?"
Deliberately, Lumian inquired, "How can I quickly master the Pyromaniac potion?"
He wanted to see if the acting method was common knowledge within the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
Gardner Martin chuckled and replied, "That's an excellent question. "To master a potion, you need to start with its name. Get close to it, understand it, and embody it. In addition, I have to tell you a maxim: flames can both incinerate others and harm yourself."
Lumian listened attentively and got a rough idea of the situation.
The Iron and Blood Cross Order kept the precise interpretation of the acting method hidden from ordinary members, using vague descriptions, regulations, warnings, and maxims to guide them without revealing everything.
This approach allowed ordinary members to avoid certain risks while gradually gaining insights by sticking close to the potion's name. They could speed up their progress but couldn't fully grasp a more suitable acting principle for themselves,
In other words, it was easier for them to "master" the potion than wild Beyonders and advance in shorter periods. However, other than the talented, those who stuck close to the acting requirements couldn't compare to Beyonders who knew the acting method.
Lumian suspected that he would only learn the entire acting

method once he became an NCO and received greater attention from the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
He believed that such a secretive organization spanning centuries must possess the acting method.
In contrast, Madam Magician of the Tarot Club had already given him extensive high-end mysticism knowledge, including the acting method.
As for Mr. K, Lumian was unsure if he had forgotten to teach the method due to devotion to his prayers and work or if he believed Lumian would naturally encounter it at the Iron and Blood Cross Order and exposing him to this knowledge too early would put him at risk of exposure.
"Pyromaniac is all about setting fires! Just go to the National Convention building and set it ablaze. You'll master the potion in no time," Albus taunted Lumian, pushing the matter.
Lumian scoffed and replied, "I'm a Pyromaniac, not an Arsonist. Meaningless acts of arson will only harm myself."
Albus sneered, "How do you know it's meaningless? Burning is the meaning."
Lumian clicked his tongue.
"Then why don't I burn your hair too?"
After engaging each other for a while in an argumentative manner, Gardner Martin intervened in the conversation, which was becoming increasingly meaningless and close to a personal attack.
Lumian shifted the conversation to probe the Iron and Blood Cross Order's knowledge of the underground.
"I went to the catacombs some time ago and sensed something amiss, but I couldn't figure out what it was. CO Sir, do you know anything about it?"
Gardner Martin glanced at Supervisor Olson beside him and finally replied, "That has nothing to do with our actions. You don't need to know.
"All I can say is that the danger lurking there is as serious as that in the Fourth Epoch Trier."
Lumian nodded thoughtfully and continued asking questions while enjoying the delicacies.
During the process, he noticed that Vincent Lorraine remained relatively quiet, and Parsifal and "Blood Palm" Black were amiable but guarded with their words, revealing little valuable information. Faustino seemed to play the role of a butler instead of the secret organization's official member.
Only the dark-red-haired Albus, despite his malicious and mocking comments, gave Lumian some useful insights.

By 10 p.m., the initiation concluded, and Lumian was the last to leave 11 Rue des Fontaines, boarding the carriage belonging to Salle de Bal Brise.

As the carriage moved, Lumian's heart skipped a beat as he looked up at the seat opposite him. At some point in time, another person had joined him—Supervisor Olson, who looked like a hungry bear. The trader who played the underground monster!

Chapter 286: Magic Mirror Divination

Ignoring Lumian's tense state, Olson spoke in a deep, raspy voice, "As per tradition, I must speak to you in private as Supervisor."

Lumian let out a relieved breath. "About what?"

Olson placed the brown suitcase beside his left leg.

"If you discover anything suspicious about your Commanding Officer, Gardner Martin, or any abnormal occurrences, report them to me immediately."

That's only right. A spot will be vacated only if something happens to the Boss... Lumian thought silently with a hint of mockery before asking, "How do I contact you?"

Olson looked into Lumian's eyes and said, "Leave the information in the basement of 13 Avenue du Marché."

13 Avenue du Marché... The Iron and Blood Cross Order is indeed linked to the burned-down building... Olson might have entered Fourth Epoch Trier and is likely seriously corrupted. Does he have a way to exploit the anomaly at 13 Avenue du Marché? Lumian recalled the previous night and felt that Supervisor Olson was even more mysterious than Commanding Officer Gardner Martin.

He suspected that Olson was secretly monitoring his movements at 13 Avenue du Marché. Gardner Martin was clearly unwilling to enter unless necessary.

Combined with the burning of 13 Avenue du Marché over a decade ago, Mr. K had mentioned that the Iron and Blood Cross Order had drifted from the other organizations that believed in that entity in recent years. Madam Magician had mentioned that the current vigil ritual wasn't the Iron and Blood Cross Order's usual test. Lumian vaguely formulated an incomplete sequence of events in his mind.

He believed that 13 Avenue du Marché hadn't been burned down by the Iron and Blood Cross Order. However, they had subsequently discovered the secret there and suffered the corresponding corruption, evoking an abnormality.

Of course, it could be the other way around: perhaps some members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order had been corrupted elsewhere, allowing them to grasp the anomaly at 13 Avenue du Marché.

"Alright." Lumian nodded in agreement.

As Lumian's mind raced with questions, he turned to Supervisor Olson, a look of puzzlement on his face.

"Was the trader I saw in the Albert Mines really you? Can your head leave your body and survive autonomously? Or was that an illusion you created?"

Olson let out a husky chuckle before responding, "Coincidentally, as Supervisor, I have three things to tell you. Firstly, what the eyes see may not be true. Secondly, we will eventually enter the Fourth Epoch's Trier. It is an inevitability. And thirdly, don't readily trust in the words of others."

Don't readily trust in the words of others... Interesting. *Should I believe your first point? What I saw in the Albert Mines was actually real?* Heh heh, it's fine to talk about inevitability in front of me, but will Termiboros tolerate it? Lumian pondered, resisting the urge to place his right hand on his left chest.

Seeing Olson pick up the small brown suitcase again, Lumian couldn't help but ask,

"What's in there? Why do you keep carrying it?"

Olson smiled.

"If I were you, I'd pray I never find out the answer."

With that, Supervisor Olson opened the carriage door and leaped into the darkness, disappearing instantly, without intentionally concealing himself as he had done when he first arrived.

"Acting all mysterious..." Lumian muttered under his breath.

Taking the carriage back to the bustling market district, he resisted the urge to hurry to Auberge du Coq Doré or the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches to contact Madam Magician's messenger and report his official admission into the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Instead, he made his way to Salle de Bal Brise.

His concern grew as he suspected that the treacherous members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order might be taking advantage of his relaxed state to continue their final, clandestine surveillance.

Although they couldn't locate Madam Magician's messenger, Lumian knew better than to return to Room 207 or the safe house at this time; it would surely raise suspicions.

Taking a seat at the bar counter, Lumian ordered a glass of Kirsch. As he savored the drink, he immersed himself in the lively song and dance happening on the stage.

Jenna had the night off, and the performers tonight were two other Showy Divas and a male underground singer known for his high-energy songs.

...

Hill District, outside the Deep Valley Cloister.

Wearing a silver-white half-mask, Jenna regarded Franca, who had donned an assassin's outfit, with concern.

"What are we going to do tonight?

"Don't tell me you're thinking of infiltrating the cloister for an investigation?"

"Of course not!" Franca denied vehemently. "The Deep Valley

Cloister is one of the most well-known cloisters of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery. They have powerful Beyonders and hide mysterious artifacts crafted by Artisan monks. With our abilities, we'd only be walking into a trap... or worse."
Franca couldn't help her mind from wandering.
She had heard rumors that though the monks in the cloister were focused on steam and machinery and didn't marry or have children, it didn't mean they refrained from sex with others.
The Church of the God of Steam and Machinery didn't prohibit such interactions!
Some said that some monks would seek out street girls from time to time to relax, while others engaged in affairs with colleagues or men who sold their bodies.
There were still a large number of people who had mechanical fetishes or were truly undergoing ascetic training, capable of controlling themselves.
Of course, Trieriens tended to exaggerate and embellish these rumors with their own ideas. It likely strayed far from the truth. Franca didn't entirely believe it, but she couldn't dismiss it entirely either.
She believed that some monks might have such inclinations, but they were likely not the majority. Nonetheless, infiltrating a cloister as a wild Beyonder was dangerous. They could be accidentally killed by machinery, used as experimental subjects, or become playthings for a select few monks. The chances of success were slim.
In short, whether male or female, anyone below Sequence 4 or lacking enough confidence ought to forget about infiltrating the Deep Valley Cloister.
Behind her hood, Franca smiled and explained in a good mood, "We scoured the area today, but found no clues. But there's one place we haven't checked."
Jenna thought for a moment and asked, "That Deep Valley Quarry?"
"That's right," Franca affirmed with a grin. "Tonight, we'll infiltrate it and conduct a search."
In truth, she didn't expect they would find anything since the official Beyonders had likely completed their investigations. Franca wanted to guide Jenna through the process and acquaint her with such matters.
"Okay." Jenna nodded slightly.
Franca saw this as an opportunity to instruct her, "Before we officially infiltrate, there's some preparatory work we must do."
"For Assassins, it's about familiarizing themselves with the environment, gathering information, and observing locations and

routes. As for Witches, they must perform divinations beforehand."
With that, Franca took out a palm-sized mirror she always carried.
Jenna immediately focused.
She had long been intrigued by mirror-related Witch abilities.
Previously, after she assassinated Hugues Artois and fled to Auberge du Coq Doré, Franca heard that she had left blood at the scene. Franca had swiftly used Mirror Substitution to sever the mystical connection between Jenna's true self and the spilled blood.
Franca surveyed the area and spoke in hushed tones under the cover of evening shadows.
"When you become a Witch, you'll naturally master Magic Mirror Divination and Staff Divination. Learning other divination methods is easy for Witches.
"The key to successful Magic Mirror Divination is choosing the right entity to pray to. The mystical symbol of the mirror connects you to an unknown being, and their answers can be obtained through this connection. However, if the unknown entity holds malice or is in a state of madness, they may influence the divination or provide a result that traps you, putting you in danger.
"When the time comes, I'll give you a few relatively safe entities to pray to. These have been verified. Among them, the one with the most accurate divination results will require you to pay a corresponding price. Unless the matter is extremely critical and urgent, I usually avoid praying to him."
"What price?" Jenna's curiosity was piqued.
Franca cleared her throat awkwardly and said, "The price could lead to you experiencing social embarrassment or something not as severe, but it will certainly be uncomfortable."
She recalled the first time she prayed to that entity for Magic Mirror Divination. In front of Madam Judgment, she was asked, "When you're masturbating, do you occasionally fantasize about certain men and feel tempted to try new experiences?"
That question almost made her shatter the intermediary mirror. At the time, she had recently become a Witch and still identified fully as a man, even though her body had already transformed into a woman's. It was natural that she would occasionally fantasize, but this revelation made her feel guilty and ashamed. Yet, she was forced to answer honestly in front of a demigod.
Even now, Franca couldn't help but cringe at the memory, wanting to bury her head in the sand and avoid any recollection.
What was social death? This was it!
Franca believed that this incident had affected her when she subsequently approached Gardner Martin to give it a shot. This

caused a crack in her psychological defense and make her give up on herself.
Embarrassment... Social death... Jenna understood the implication behind Franca's words. Though Jenna had her thoughts, she chose not to voice them aloud.
Franca provided a brief explanation of Magic Mirror Divination, concluding with a demonstration. She gently caressed the surface of the mirror and recited the name of a safe entity.
As an aqueous light shimmered in the mirror, she posed a serious question, "Will exploring Trier's Deep Valley Quarry tonight be dangerous?"
Since it was a question-based divination, the requirements for the statements weren't too stringent.
Under Jenna's curious and hopeful gaze, a deep, old voice emanated from the mirror, as if it had emerged from the depths of a river. "There is a certain level of danger."

Chapter 287: Key

Franca finished the Magic Mirror Divination and then turned to Jenna, giving her interpretation of the answer.

"Normally, this means it's dangerous, but we can handle it. If we're careful, we should be fine."

Jenna asked in surprise, "I thought the divination results would be straightforward."

Surprisingly, such a brief sentence came with such a long explanation.

"It's straightforward!" Franca emphasized with a smile. "If you visit the Divination Club in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative and find amateurs, their readings will be even vaguer. It makes it easier for them to interpret any result. Oh, have you never had anyone do divination for you before?"

Jenna nodded frankly.

Performing a divination cost a fortune!

Franca looked thoughtful, her eyes darting around.

"You can subscribe to Psychic, Lotus, Arcane, and Hidden Veil. While they have their problems and errors in specific applications, they offer valuable basic knowledge about mysticism.

"Ah, right. Ciel often buys those magazines. You can... Uh, I'll help you borrow them!"

"Alright." Jenna had only heard of mysticism magazines but had never bought one.

Having obtained satisfactory divination results, the duo, who had observed the route and surroundings during the day, swiftly arrived at the entrance of Deep Valley Quarry under the cover of the night.

The gatekeeper, who seemed to be in his forties, was sleeping in a small hut made of rocks. Wrapped in a dirty, old, and thin felt cloth, he leaned against the mountain wall.

Suddenly, a slender, smooth palm reached out from the shadow beside him, covering his mouth with a white handkerchief.

The gatekeeper didn't struggle. Within seconds, he went from slumbering to unconsciousness.

Franca, wearing a black hood, emerged from the shadows and clicked her tongue, sighing.

"The Bliss Society's sedative is really effective. It saves me a lot of trouble."

For this operation, she had borrowed Rentas's sedative from Lumian.

Jenna couldn't understand. "Couldn't we just knock him out?"

"That would work," Franca explained casually, "but that would

leave traces. It won't be easy to make it seem like he's still asleep. Many bounty hunters and private detectives are involved in this mission. We shouldn't be the only ones targeting this quarry. So, it's better to be cautious and avoid leaving any loose ends."
Jenna, who had lived in Quartier du Jardin Botanique and the market district for many years, roughly understood Franca's point. She pondered for a moment and asked, "Are you worried that the bounty hunters and private detectives will have ill intentions if they find us entering the quarry ahead of them in the dead of night?"
Franca nodded, satisfied with her response.
"That's right. Many bounty hunters and private detectives switch to becoming bandits, robbers, and even murderers, depending on the situation and their surroundings.
"They take risks for money, not for justice. Since there are no leads for this mission and the current environment is suitable, it's in line with their style to steal from their peers and eliminate competition. After all, there's no one else here.
"Of course, with our strength, we don't have to fear bounty hunters and private detectives. But what if we make a similar mistake in another situation or face something more dangerous? That's why we have to be mindful from the beginning."
What Franca didn't say was that, being women, they might likely suffer more.
Jenna nodded slowly, agreeing with the reasoning.
She had seen criminals kill an old man living alone for just 5 verl d'or.
Franca smiled and teased, "Did you want me to knock him out to get back at him for asking if you wanted to join the street girl business this morning?"
"Dammit! Am I such a petty person?" Jenna couldn't help but curse.
Whether it was during her years helping her mother with chores or when she was a local singer in the market district, she had been asked if she wanted to be involved in the street girl business so many times that she was used to it. She was a little angry, but not too much.
To show her magnanimity, Jenna exhaled and said, "When you use that sedative on others, it reminds me of what happened to me."
She had also been drugged and nearly became a victim that disappeared. Fortunately, she had encountered Lumian.
Franca simply acknowledged her words.
"I understand your feelings, but since you've embarked on the path of the divine and intend to become stronger, you'll have to use

various means to deal with your enemies in the future. You can't give up on a better option just because you feel a little repulsed."
Jenna knew Franca had a point, but she couldn't help asking, "Can't a Beyonder lead a quiet, ordinary life without being drawn into conflicts and battles while protecting loved ones?"
"In the past, maybe it was feasible, but nowadays it's exceedingly challenging. The more you advance, the harder it gets until it's virtually impossible," Franca replied with a sigh.
Jenna fell silent for a moment before saying, "Could it ever be possible in the distant future, I wonder?"
Franca glanced at the "slumbering" gatekeeper and answered, "That prominent figure once told me that such a life might be attainable at the end of the Fifth Epoch and the beginning of the Sixth Epoch, if there's even a Sixth Epoch at all."
Sixth Epoch... Those words made Jenna reflect for a few seconds before she burst into laughter at herself.
"I guess it's just wishful thinking on my part. Achieving that kind of life is simply an illusion. At least, it is for me. With superpowers and a history of attempted assassination, I know I'd be unable to stand idly by if my family and friends faced hardship. I'd feel compelled to use my abilities to tackle problems that go beyond what the law and police can handle."
Franca nodded in agreement. "That's just the way it is."
She hadn't simply digested the Assassin and Instigator potions hoping her attire alone would do the trick, nor had she only encouraged her friends by instigating them.
Without much ado, Franca bent down and picked up the brass key from the gatekeeper.
"There's just one door. Why are there so many keys? Are they all for his house?" Franca muttered as she exited the hut and walked toward the entrance of Deep Valley Quarry. She tried each key, one after the other.
In the end, she muttered to herself in shock and suspicion, "None of it is right..."
"None of them are right?" Jenna hadn't expected such a possibility.
If not a single key could unlock the entrance to Deep Valley Quarry, what was the point of watching the door?
Franca said, partly instructing and partly thinking aloud, "Perhaps this set of keys is a decoy. The real key must be hidden somewhere else."
She then said to Jenna, "Search the area. I'll take a look at the gatekeeper."
Jenna didn't object. With her Night Vision, she began searching the nearby bushes and crevices starting from the hut.

Franca squatted beside the gatekeeper and meticulously searched his body from head to toe.
When she reached his crotch, she bent her finger and flicked it firmly. She sneered and whispered, "Jenna may not be petty, but I am!"
After their search, the two of them met at the heavy wooden door, shaking their heads to signal they had found nothing.
Franca clicked her tongue and said, "There's definitely something wrong with this quarry.
"That guy is truly a gatekeeper. He's only meant to watch the door but lacks the ability to open it!"
"Are we still going in?" Jenna asked hesitantly.
"I'll give it another shot." Franca extended her right hand to the copper lock embedded in the heavy wooden door.
Thick frost emerged from her palm, filling the keyhole.
The frost continued to accumulate and compress until it finally solidified into ice.
Franca skillfully extracted the ice block, revealing a transparent key.
That works? Jenna was surprised and eager to see what happened next.
Sensing her gaze, Franca said smugly, "I have a friend, you see—I really have a friend—one who's quite skilled at picking locks. We had a conversation about using a Witch's power for such purposes."
Once she made the ice more solid, Franca inserted it into the keyhole again and twisted it gently.
With a click, the heavy wooden door swung open.
Franca retracted the ice key and allowed it to melt, erasing all traces.
Before venturing into Deep Valley Quarry, the Witch hung the brass key back on the gatekeeper's waist and adjusted his posture to make him appear asleep.
With that done, Franca fetched a pouch of coins and took out a thick iron-colored ring adorned with tiny spikes.
"This is the Ring of Punishment I mentioned before. You'll wear it today. I've already explained how to use it and its taboos. One thing to remember: you can't use it more than three times within an hour. Also, take it off immediately after the operation and put it back in this coin bag."
"Alright." Jenna extended her left hand and allowed Franca to put the iron-colored ring on her middle finger, keeping their skin in contact.
Franca couldn't contain her inexplicable joy as she adjusted her

hood, confidently pushed open the creaky wooden door, and stepped into Deep Valley Quarry.
Once Jenna joined her inside, she made sure to close and lock the wooden door behind them.
This made it nearly impossible for anyone outside to detect their presence within the quarry.
As skilled Assassins with night vision, Franca and Jenna didn't rely on carbide lamps, yet they could easily see everything within the tunnel.
The passageway was in a state of disrepair, covered in moss, and with cracks running along the stone walls, giving an ominous feeling that any moment, a piece might collapse.
A short distance ahead, they noticed an empty hole, no different from the other underground ones they had seen before.
For almost half an hour, Jenna and Franca diligently searched the small area, looking for any signs of suspicious activity, but their efforts yielded no results.
"Something's definitely not right," Franca whispered, her voice barely audible, as they returned to the spot near the tunnel entrance.
The complete absence of anything unusual happening made them even more suspicious about the gatekeeper not having the key to unlock the door.
Jenna pondered for a moment and then suggested, "Maybe he's afraid that someone might storm in and cause the mine to collapse, so he decided to keep the key away. A gatekeeper's job is only to intercept, not to open the door."
Before Franca could say something, they heard a distinct click.
It was the sound of the Deep Valley Quarry's door opening!
Franca and Jenna exchanged glances and quickly found cover not far from the exit of the tunnel.
The quarry door creaked open, and the soft bluish glow of a carbide lamp spilled out, pushing back the darkness in the tunnel.
Franca and Jenna peeked out and caught sight of a man in a gray robe.
The man had a white apron wrapped around his waist, a typical garment worn by ancient stonemasons. The hood of his robe rested at the back of his neck, not covering his head.
Such attire was commonly associated with ascetics or monks of the God of Steam and Machinery Church.
Holding a lit carbide lamp, the monk had dark, short hair. His left eye was a mesmerizing combination of iron-gray gears, screws, and springs, all supporting an emerald-green crystalline false eye.

Chapter 288: Self-Recommendation

In the city of Trier, prosthetic eyes were not a common sight, but there were still a fair number of people who wore them. But Jenna and Franca had never seen anyone take mechanizing a quarter of their faces for a prosthetic eye to this extent.

However, when they recalled that the monk was suspected to be from the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, it made sense. Fanatical devotion to machinery was their hallmark!

Carrying a carbide lamp and wearing a white apron like a stonemason, the monk entered the tunnel step by step. His emerald-green prosthetic eye, surrounded by gears and springs, seemed to possess a life of its own as it rotated left and right, scanning the surroundings.

Franca tugged at Jenna, signaling for her not to look towards the tunnel. She was to quickly avert her gaze to avoid detection.

The two of them slunk deeper into the shadows, hiding beyond the reach of the carbide lamp's light.

The gray-robed, hooded monk from the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery advanced slowly, surveying his surroundings as he approached the bottom of Deep Valley Quarry, the area that had collapsed and been buried.

Thanks to their Assassin abilities and the cover of darkness, Jenna and Franca remained undetected. They waited until the monk was far away before quietly peeking out from their hiding spot, eyes fixed on his back.

The monk stopped beside the collapsed area, extending his right palm which glinted with an iron-like metallic sheen, grasping a protrusion on the wall.

A grinding sound echoed as if multiple massive gears were slowly rotating and meshing.

The stone wall cracked open as metal chains extended out from behind each rock. The rocks bloomed like flowers, revealing a dark cave behind.

With the help of the monk's carbide lamp and their eagle-eyed Assassin vision, Franca and Jenna could see a thin white fog inside the cave and arms and legs embedded in the rock walls—human arms and legs!

Some were still fresh while others had shriveled, but there were no signs of decay.

Jenna and Franca exchanged shocked and fearful looks.

As the monk entered the cave and triggered a mechanism, the metal chains relaxed, allowing the rocks to return to their original positions, leaving only faint cracks as signs of the hidden

entrance.
So that's how it is... I assumed the cracks were from a collapse, so I didn't inspect them... Franca realized why they hadn't noticed anything amiss before.
She tugged Jenna's arm and whispered, "Let's get out of here first and come back another time."
Having discovered the secret and knowing how to open it, there was no need to confront the monk from the God of Steam and Machinery Church directly. They could return later!
Jenna nodded slightly, twirled the Ring of Punishment on her finger, and crouched down. She followed Franca away from their hiding spot and back through the tunnel to the entrance of Deep Valley Quarry.
Seeing Jenna about to open the door, Franca quickly stopped her and whispered, "No hurry."
"Why?" Jenna asked, puzzled.
Franca straightened instinctively and smiled.
"Just because one monk went in doesn't mean he's alone. Perhaps there are two companions outside, guarding against intruders. If we stroll out casually, we might expose ourselves and get attacked! Besides, the gatekeeper could be awake already."
Jenna looked a little abashed. "You're right."
Franca consoled her immediately, "It's just experience. Now you know better for the future."
She took out a palm-sized mirror and handed it to Jenna. "Help me carry this. I'll scout ahead. If I get ambushed, take the chance to hide in the shadows by the door and sneak out with the mirror."
Realizing Franca intended to use Mirror Substitution, Jenna agreed without hesitation.
Franca carefully opened the heavy wooden door a crack and peeked out.
The only sounds were chirping insects and frogs. All was still otherwise.
The door opened wider and Franca slipped out into the darkness beyond the crimson moonlight's reach.
Jenna gripped the mirror tightly, tense and ready.
After more than ten seconds, Franca returned and whispered, "It's clear, let's go."
Jenna exhaled in relief and darted out, closing the door silently behind them.
As they left the quarry, they glanced at the rock-walled "hut" and saw the gatekeeper still asleep, but in a different posture.
From a distance, Franca noticed a red and swollen mark under his ear. "He was knocked out, not drugged..." she murmured with a

frown.
Jenna recalled the cybernetic-eyed monk and pointed at the quarry door. "The one inside did it?"
Franca nodded gently. "Very likely. He doesn't want the gatekeeper to know he's here. Poor man, he probably fainted again before the sedative wore off."
Jenna smiled. "Or someone else knocked him out before we got here. Someone might have used some other method to knock him out."
"..." Franca paused, then sighed sympathetically. "If so, I feel bad for him."
Oblivious to each other, every group had dealt with the gatekeeper their own way. As a result, the poor man remained unconscious repeatedly.
Wasting no time, Jenna and Franca slipped away under the cover of the night.
...
Avenue du Marché, Salle de Bal Brise.
Lumian returned to the café upstairs, ordered a glass of red wine, and sipped it slowly.
After a while, Louis came up and whispered, "Boss, some bounty hunters are causing trouble at Salle de Gristmill, demanding a cut of the profits."
With the Poison Spur Mob's upper ranks destroyed, some remnants had been arrested, some had fled, some joined other mobs, and some found legitimate work. Their former businesses had been taken over at low prices by various factions.
The Savoie Mob got the largest share but now lacked manpower. Some industries operated fairly independently. Occasionally, opportunists tried to take advantage of the "power vacuum."
Lumian cracked his knuckles and grinned. "Send word asking if they want to be my enemies or my dogs."
He realized that after becoming a Pyromaniac, he had grown more aggressive. Itching for a fight after so long, his hands twitched in anticipation.
Furthermore, for someone to dare challenge a dance hall nominally belonging to the Savoie Mob, there might be one or two Beyonders among the bounty hunters. Lumian's Shadow Branch lacked a corresponding Beyonder characteristic.
"Yes, Boss!" Louis replied eagerly before hurrying downstairs to send the "invitation."
Lumian had planned to return to Auberge du Coq Doré to write Madam Magician but now waited patiently.
In less than half an hour, Louis returned with a man.

He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, wearing a cheap suit and black top hat. With brown hair, brown eyes, refined features, and a burly build, he could have been a protagonist at the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons
Seeing Lumian, the man smiled, doffed his hat, and greeted, "Good evening, Boss."
"Who are you?" Lumian asked with an amiable smile.
The man replied solemnly, "Boss, didn't you ask me to be your dog?"
"..." Momentarily stunned, even the quick-witted Lumian needed a few seconds to respond.
He had said it purely to provoke them and see if they would retaliate.
After recovering, Lumian chuckled. "I told you to be a dog, and you'll really do it?"
"This is my big chance!" The man didn't seem ashamed at all, rather honored. "I believe following you will let me achieve my true worth. In time, I could even become your godson!"
How old are you? You're more fawning than "Giant" Simon... Interested, Lumian asked, "Why do you think I'll give you a chance?"
The man didn't answer immediately but glanced meaningfully at Louis and Sarkota, hinting for them to leave.
Unworried about assassination attempts, Lumian had them exit before smiling at the man. "Go on."
The man cleared his throat. "My name is Lugano Toscano, a Beyonder."
"Which pathway? What Sequence?" Lumian's eyebrows rose.
Lugano forced a smile. "I'm a Planter, Sequence 9."
Earth Mother Church's pathway? Lumian nodded thoughtfully. "From Feynapotter?"
"No, Riston Province," Lugano replied, smiling. "A few years ago, some friends and I became bounty hunters. I got to know a Feynapotter Beyonder and later acquired his belongings when he passed away."
A fellow countryman... Did you kill him or just conveniently profit from his death? Lumian gestured for him to continue.
Lugano chuckled. "I can now advance to Sequence 8 Doctor but lack funds for the potion ingredients. I've heard of your exploits, Boss, and believe you to be a powerful Beyonder. I also know the Savoie Mob lacks manpower, so I caused some trouble to meet you. I hope to work for you, help manage your estates, and earn money through hard work. Doctors are useful for ordinary people and Beyonders alike."

Chapter 289: Late Night Visitors

"Doctor?" Lumian recalled the two canisters of Healing Agent obtained from the Poison Spur Mob.

Their healing effects were quite impressive indeed.

Leaning back in his chair, Lumian gazed intently into Lugano Toscano's eyes, pondering silently for some time.

Gradually Lugano grew uneasy, his body tensing up.

Finally Lumian smiled.

"Salle de Gristmill isn't my property. I'm just managing it for the Boss.

"I'm not sure you can handle it, but I'll give you a chance."

Lugano visibly relaxed and smiled. "Boss, I won't let you down!"

Lumian raised his voice to call Louis over.

"From now on, you'll be Lugano's deputy at the Gristmill. Manage it together."

Is this for real? But why give an untested new recruit such an important post? Before Louis could react, Lumian had already turned to Lugano.

"You have two months. You and your friends will be the dance hall's protectors for now. Take a portion of the profits; negotiate the details with the manager."

He deliberately left the profit distribution vague, especially his own cut. He wanted to see what Lugano would do.

"Thank you, Boss!" Lugano's joy was unconcealed.

He nearly blurted out, "Once I'm a Doctor, I'll treat any illness or injury you have." But that felt like cursing misfortune upon Lumian, so he quickly sealed his lips.

Watching them leave while discussing the dance hall, Lumian's smile faded.

Lugano's fawning and zeal made him suspect ulterior motives, like him with Baron Brignais and the fake diamond necklace.

But Lumian had cowed the Baron by showing his might and madness. The key was proving the value of exploiting him. Lugano was more focused on ingratiation. Of course, he had revealed his usefulness too.

That's why Lumian decided to give him Salle de Gristmill for two months—to monitor any abnormalities and act quickly if the bounty hunter had hidden motives. Or gain a Doctor cheaply if he was clean.

Either way, it wouldn't cost Lumian anything. Salle de Gristmill belonged to the Savoie Mob; he would just lose some of his own share. That could be offset by Lugano stabilizing the unruly dance hall.

After sitting awhile, Lumian left for Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré. Drawing the curtains, he sat at the table and began writing.
"Esteemed Madam Magician,
"I've officially joined the Iron Blood Cross Order.
"The initiation ritual was...
"I'm puzzled. The Order has members clearly not from the Hunter pathway. How did they pass the vigil? Assassins? Or did Gardner confirm their trustworthiness some other way, bypassing corruption?"
He almost asked about entering 13 Avenue du Marché at special times, but that was surely monitored by official Beyonders. It was unlikely anyone could approach then.
After neatly folding the letter, Lumian summoned the doll messenger on the altar.
Wary, he asked, "Am I still being watched?"
"No," the doll slowly shook her head.
Relieved, Lumian scheduled reporting to Mr. K and heading to The Fool's cathedral for a sermon.
After nearly fifteen minutes, Madam Magician replied:
"I once heard from Mr. Fool's Oracle that a friend of his was originally in the Iron and Blood Cross Order but couldn't stand it and fled to sea.
"I didn't understand at first, but now I see—it's been hard on you."
It wasn't so bad. Watching them perform was rather interesting, a study in human diversity... Lumian didn't see an issue with it.
Something else concerned him more.
When mentioning the Oracle, Madam Magician didn't say "one of."
Lumian suspected Mr. Fool had only a single Oracle!
Meaning the Major Arcana card holders of the Divine Council weren't considered Oracles.
Pondering this, Lumian read on:
"They might be Assassins or used another corruption method.
"Remind the Two of Cups—if accepting the vigil, bring the ancient underground mirror. Other than keeping in mind not to respond, it's best to bring the ancient mirror that provides entry into the underground mirror world. Hunter/Demoness corruption likely differs. It may help."
That mirror... Mulling it over, Lumian swiftly burned the letter in crimson flames.
Just as he was about to wash up, he sensed something and glanced at the door.
A series of knocks promptly came.
"Who is it?" he called.
A strained voice answered, "Guess who I am."

Seated, Lumian looked helplessly at the bedbug-free ceiling. "Come in."
As expected, it was Franca and Jenna, dressed as Assassins.
"Here to play Fighting Evil?" he joked.
Franca scoffed, "I don't play cards with sore losers like you."
Having tricked many into drinking excessively over card games recently, Lumian had been winning at Fighting Evil with the ladies and mocking their poor skills. Suspecting cheating, Franca had intensely coached her dancers the past few days.
Entering, Franca added, "We're here to borrow mysticism magazines."
Lumian sneered. "Nice try. Why come so late just for that? Is waiting till morning not an option? Jenna doesn't seem the studying type."
He smiled. "What's really going on?"
The two gritted their teeth in sync.
After Franca shut the door, Jenna glanced around and whispered, "Are the walls too thin here? Could neighbors overhear us?"
Lumian smiled approvingly. "You're learning—thinking about eavesdroppers now. Not like before, blabbing recklessly without a care."
Before... Franca's suspicious gaze shifted from Jenna to Lumian, then from Lumian to Jenna.
"Dammit! "We didn't discuss anything important!" Jenna defended. "Why not mention Charlie? He spills secrets immediately."
Charlie? Franca's frown faded.
"It was fine—others were asleep or gone. That's why I didn't stop him." Lumian stood, ritual dagger in hand. Letting spirituality flow from the blade, he enveloped the room in a wall of spirituality.
The singing and rowdiness on the streets and the inn's noises instantly grew distant and muted.
Jenna was amazed. Franca pursed her lips and said to Jenna, "A basic wall of spirituality ritual. Once you become a Witch, you'll naturally master it."
At this point, she couldn't help but imagine what Witch Jenna would look like.
The two ladies sat side by side by Lumian's bed and discussed the missing Deep Valley Cloister gatekeeper, focused on their quarry findings tonight.
"What's down there? What should we do?" Franca returned Lumian's sedative.
Lumian smiled at his companion who wasn't wearing red boots. "Don't you have an answer already?"
With Franca's experience, she surely had a plan by now.

Franca smiled awkwardly. "Just wanted your thoughts."
"My thoughts?" Lumian joked, "Sneak in while the monk's away for that 20,000 verl d'or!"
Jenna looked around warily. "Meaning it's too dangerous to investigate further?"
Having heard Lumian's mockery countless times now, she could distinguish sarcasm, well-meaning teasing, and jokes.
"Right," said Franca. "Recalling the client, there seems to be an internal Deep Valley Cloister conflict—someone hiding, someone exposing. Meddling in an orthodox Church's internal conflict is dangerous for any Beyonder."
"Internal conflict?" Jenna was startled.
Lumian chuckled. "A missing gatekeeper, and some random person offers 20,000 to find him, even just the corpse? And said corpse needs to be carried to the Deep Valley Cloister. Clearly wants someone to see it."
Jenna was almost convinced, but she still had a lot of doubts. "B-but the limbs in the cave seem too sinister for an orthodox Church."

Chapter 290: Lavigny Docks

"Er..." Franca deliberated briefly before telling Jenna, "When it comes to losing control and madness, orthodox or wild Beyonder—all are equal. Those monks can become monsters too, or have mental problems and walk the abyss."

Jenna grew grave as she listened.

It wasn't the first time Franca had said something similar, but without personal experience, the full cruelty and horror of those words never quite sunk in. Seeing the limbs in the dark cave had driven home the visceral reality of losing control and madness.

Lumian added meaningfully, "That's why the acting method is so important."

"But never forget you're only acting. You should know very well being a theater actress—you mustn't lose yourself in a role. Even without being a Beyonder, that path leads to mental issues." Franca and Lumian educated the newcomer one after another.

Jenna nodded solemnly.

Franca returned to the missing gatekeeper. "My plan is this—reveal the cave anonymously to the Eternal Blazing Sun Church via my sources. How they handle it is their affair. Even if they suppress it, they'll be vigilant against trouble now. I'll also inform the client and see his reaction. We might get paid for our work."

She chose the Eternal Blazing Sun Church over the God of Steam and Machinery Church Beyonders, unsure which side was trustworthy in this internal conflict.

"No objections here," Jenna conceded after hearing their advice, shelving her longing for the 20,000 verl d'or reward.

Franca turned to Lumian. "I've found a buyer for Harvest Sacrifice, but the deal isn't finalized yet. Offer is 10,000 verl d'or. I gave you 4,000 already, and can give you another 1,000 in two days."

"Very efficient." Lumian smiled approvingly.

"Can't tell if that's praise or mockery," Franca muttered.

Jenna listened enviously. 10,000 verl d'or was casual business for them, while her family struggled to pay 7,000-8,000 for the treatment of her mother.

This is what it means to be a Beyonder... Her understanding grew clearer.

Glancing at the curtains, Lumian didn't get Jenna to leave. "Last night, I completed the test and officially joined the Boss's inner circle."

"What kind of test?" Still aggrieved, Franca had already vented her anger once, leaving mostly curiosity.

Lumian described Gardner's late visit to Salle de Bal Brise, how he

was requested to stay the night at 13 Avenue du Marché, and him overcoming the abnormal corruption until sunrise.
He concealed Termiboros, portraying himself as intelligent, decisive, perceptive and steadfast—grasping the crux with just a few details and adhering to the principle of no response despite the influences.
Lumian excelled at fabrication.
Franca still felt lingering fear and suspicion. "You really didn't waver at all?"
Jenna agreed—she would have responded the moment the door opened. Franca might have lasted until her face bled.
Lumian chuckled. "I definitely felt some uncertainty, but I trusted my judgment more."
Franca sized him up doubtfully. "You really thought of not responding by yourself?"
"No." Lumian ended the fiction honestly.
"..." The ladies were stunned.
Lumian seized the chance to divert attention, smiling. "Don't be daft. A recently graduated mysticism novice like me could never think of that. I got intelligence beforehand of course. If you do the vigil, remember—do not respond, and take the mirror that provides entry into the underground mirror world. 13 Avenue du Marché's abnormalities may differ by pathway."
Enlightened, Franca grasped his source. She muttered, "No girlfriend for you with that attitude!"
She had almost been provoked just now, let alone a real woman. Relieved, Franca thought the rascal Ciel had no romantic prospects currently.
While still irked by the mockery, Jenna also regained confidence.
She had thought her intelligence irredeemably inferior to Ciel's.
Admirably, he had firmly trusted the intelligence and not wavered.
She pursed her lips and said, "I'm seeing more of the mysticism world's horrors."
The 13 Avenue du Marché abnormality was even more terrifying than the Deep Valley Quarry's secret cave scene. By comparison, her underground ordeal with Hedsey seemed just a criminal case.
"There will be more such occurrences in the coming years." Franca seized every chance to motivate Jenna's advancement.
Lumian then mentioned his guess that Avenue du Marché 13 only affected Beyonders of the Hunter and Demoness pathways at specific times.
Discussing a while longer, the ladies left with a stack of mysticism magazines, returning to Rue des Blouses Blanches.
...

At 3 p.m. the next day, Lumian, who had been playing the part at Salle de Bal Brise all day, arrived at Lavigny Docks in the square district by taking multiple public carriages, ready to hear The Fool bishop's sermon.
It was a lively inland river port, teeming with steam ships emitting white fog. Countless dockworkers used various tools and their strength to move crates of goods and stack them on flat surfaces along the tracks.
Massive machines towered over the docks, some standing more than ten to twenty meters tall, made entirely of steel components. Operated by massive steam engines and controlled by technicians, they effortlessly lifted steel crates that would be impossible for humans to move.
Lumian observed the chaotic and bustling scene, a mix of spectacular sights and grimy realities.
He strolled around the dock, acting like a carefree tourist rather than inquiring about The Fool cathedral's location from suspicious foreigners.
Buildings surrounded the harbor, housing bars, motels, warehouses, beer houses, cafés, restaurants, and dance halls. Street vendors loudly peddled their goods along the paths.
Lumian also noticed frosted glass windows with green shutters, indicating licensed brothels.
After taking a long detour, Lumian finally arrived at Mr. Fool's cathedral.
It looked like an ordinary four-story house with a bell tower and pointed roof, completely black. Engraved on the outer wall was the familiar mystical symbol: Mr. Fool's symbol, a silvery-white symbol composed of an incomplete Pupil-less Eye and a portion of Contorted Lines.
Before entering, Lumian took his time, continuing to explore the area as if he were casually shopping.
As a Hunter, it was second nature for him to assess his surroundings when he had the chance.
After walking for a while, Lumian chose a bar called Sea Breeze to gather information about The Fool cathedral from merchants, sailors, and locals.
The interior of Sea Breeze was decorated like a cabin, with taxidermied fish, rudders, and sail fragments adorning the walls. The air was thick with the scent of liquor and cheap cosmetics.
Some sailors sat together, engrossed in a card game, while others were seen in the company of street girls. At the bar counter, a few were enjoying drinks and boasting.
Lumian scanned the area and noticed a man who immediately

caught his attention.
This man sat in an armchair near the bar, exuding an air of arrogance as he casually rested his hands on the chair's back. He occasionally sipped his wheat beer, propping his legs up on the small round table.
It wasn't just the man's demeanor that intrigued Lumian, but the way the other sailors behaved around him.
They either kept their distance, giving the area a wide berth, or approached with deferential expressions. Even if they were teased by the man, they seemed honored to be in his presence.
A significant figure from the sea, perhaps? Lumian speculated silently as he subtly studied the man.
The man appeared to be in his thirties, dressed in a linen shirt, a brown vest, dark brown pants, and sturdy black leather boots. His eyebrows and hair were charred yellow, like they had been kissed by flames. His bright, dark blue eyes and facial features hinted at a southern Intis heritage.
Feeling Lumian's gaze on him, the man smiled and lifted his wheat beer in a toast.
Returning the smile, Lumian made his way to the bar counter, ordering a glass of Lanti Proof, a favorite among pirates and sailors.
Taking a sip of the flavorful and potent malt liquor, Lumian couldn't contain his curiosity. He nodded towards the nearby armchair and asked the bartender in a hushed tone,
"Who is that?"
The bartender's expression turned serious as he responded in a deep voice, "You don't know him?"
To him, not recognizing that individual was rather surprising.

Chapter 291: Important Figure

Lumian set his glass down and flashed a smile, speaking in Intisian but with the accent of the Riston Province.

"I arrived in Trier just two days ago. Came to Lavigne in search of work."

Thanks to Aurore's help, he could speak like a local from Trier, shedding his Riston Province Dariège accent. Having spent six years in Cordu, he had a knack for learning, imitating, and adapting to new dialects effortlessly.

The tired bartender looked around as if he hadn't slept well and spoke cautiously, "That's the famous Blazing Danitz, a significant figure at sea!"

"I've never heard of him," Lumian replied bluntly.

The bartender cleared his throat, reminding Lumian to watch his tone and attitude.

"Have you heard about the six Pirate Kings and nine Pirate Admirals?"

"A little," Lumian honestly admitted.

His knowledge about the Pirate Kings and Pirate Admirals came from newspapers and adventure novels, and he was aware of Gehrman Sparrow hunting down a few. He knew that the great adventurer's servant, Dubois, had once served as a pirate on Vice Admiral Iceberg's ship. He knew of Ailment Maiden or Vice Admiral Ailment, and the frequent change of Pirate Admirals. As for the Pirate Kings, they were well-established and had held their positions for so long that no one could remember when they first came to power.

Realizing Lumian wasn't completely ignorant, the bartender breathed a sigh of relief.

"That individual used to be a pirate, acknowledged to be stronger than all the Pirate Admirals, second only to the six Pirate Kings."

Quite impressive... Lumian couldn't determine the exact Sequences of the Pirate Admirals and Pirate Kings, but their survival despite constant pursuit by the authorities showed they weren't weak.

Blazing Danitz ranked seventh among the pirates, almost reaching the level of a quasi-Pirate King. He was undeniably formidable!

A Saint? If he's one, the same can be said for the Pirate Kings... The strongest among Sequence 5s? Lumian quickly grasped the bartender's words.

"Used to be?"

"Yes, used to be. He's no longer a pirate or a Treasure Hunter. Look, there's no wanted poster of him on the wall." The bartender gestured around.

But there's my wanted poster... Thankfully, the bounty is low. It's tucked away in a corner where no one pays attention... Lumian asked curiously, "He can just stop being a pirate because he wants to? Did the authorities cooperate and revoke his wanted poster?"
Which country or orthodox Church did he surrender to?
The bartender lowered his voice even further.
"He's now a member of the Church of The Fool, the envoy of that deity."
Mr. Fool's Oracle? Perhaps that one and only Oracle? Lumian was taken aback.
The bartender assumed Lumian wasn't familiar with the Church of The Fool, so he explained, "That's a deity recognized by all orthodox Churches. Heh heh, why would a deity choose such a name?
"The Fool's faith is very popular at sea. Many sea merchants and sailors believe in Him. They even pooled money to build The Fool cathedral in Lavigny."
"The cathedral's bishop is that Oracle?" Lumian deliberately lowered his voice.
"No." The bartender shook his head. "But Blazing Danitz often comes to Trier. He likes it here. Yes, he's from Intis. There isn't an Intisian who doesn't long for Trier."
Just as Lumian was about to say something, the important figure at sea, the Oracle of The Fool's Church, Blazing Danitz, finished his remaining wheat beer and stood up, heading towards Sea Breeze's entrance.
Almost simultaneously, the sailors—playing cards, drinking, boasting, and making out with street girls—stood up in an unusually orderly fashion.
They didn't cause any commotion as they silently and orderly followed Blazing Danitz out of the bar.
If he hadn't witnessed this scene, Lumian wouldn't have realized that all the sailors in the bar were subordinates of The Fool's Oracle.
Blazing Danitz... From his nickname, he deals with fire... *Could he also be from the Hunter pathway?* Lumian sipped his Lanti Proof and chatted with the bartender about the Church of The Fool.
"What kind of deity is The Fool?"
The bartender gestured a triangular Sacred Emblem on his chest and shook his head.
"I'm not a follower, so how would I know?"
"By steam!" Lumian drew a triangular Sacred Emblem on his chest as well.
The bartender glanced at the empty area and said, "But the Church

of The Fool isn't bad. Even if you're just a tramp, even if you don't believe in The Fool, you can still receive communion after entering their cathedral.
"If you ask them for help, you might even get a meal with meat and bread and a room to sleep in."
"Should I join the queue now?" Lumian asked with a smile.
The bartender shook his head again.
"No need. They can't leave the cathedral to preach or proselytize. Only the local tramps know they can seek help there, but they only go once in a while because the Church of The Fool is more willing to offer job opportunities to them."
After a pleasant chat and having figured out the schedule of The Fool's cathedral's bishop sermons, Lumian finished his Lanti Proof and decided to make the most of the spare time by exploring the nearby streets in detail.
He soon noticed that several strategic points were guarded by the military, armed with cannons and massive firearms that required water-cooling.
The government's distrust of these sailors and merchants, who occasionally indulge in piracy around the docks, is evident... Lumian turned away and hurried towards The Fool's cathedral before darkness fell.
The cathedral had a simple layout, devoid of gold embellishments or intricate machinery. The most remarkable aspect was its numerous windows, allowing natural light to illuminate the interior without the need for candles and gas lamps even before nightfall.
Like many religious spaces, the walls were adorned with giant murals, although the colors were muted and somber.
Using the fading light of dusk, Lumian examined the mural's contents and discovered that it depicted a wilderness where humans struggled to navigate.
These humans were unusually tall, almost resembling legendary giants. Some had three eyes, while others lacked noses, leaving only two dark holes. They looked more like monsters than ordinary people.
Despite the pain and despair evident on their faces, their eyes shimmered with hope.
Leading these peculiar humans were several distinct and detailed guides. Some had gray hair and carried two swords on their backs. Others wielded dark-blue sledgehammers emitting a sun-like glow. There were also figures clad in dark black armor with silver-gray curly hair...
At the forefront of these guides stood a figure.

Dressed in a black trench coat and a half top hat, the figure walked with a straight back, holding a lantern.
Just ahead of the figure was a ball of light—the altar of The Fool's cathedral—a silver-white Sacred Emblem emitting a radiant glow under the sunlight.
Lumian's attention was drawn to a few stained glass panes. Sculpted in an exaggerated style, angels and saints adorned them. Some were also featured in the murals, while others were not. There were angels with wings and halos, and saints with only halos.
Lumian carefully circled the area, observing for over half an hour. Eventually, he found a seat and settled in to wait for the 6 p.m. sermon.
As time passed, many people entered the cathedral. Some were dressed as merchants, others as typical sailors. There were also dockworkers, visibly exhausted after a long day's work, and a few street girls as well.
Amidst the tolling of the bell, the bishop arrived at the altar.
His hair and eyes shone with a golden hue. Towering at 2.56 meters tall, he donned a finely tailored black trench coat and a half top hat, hardly resembling a typical clergyman.
With a hearty gesture, the boorish bishop pressed his hand to his chest and called out in a booming voice, "Praise The Fool!"
"Praise The Fool!" echoed the gathered believers, and Lumian enthusiastically joined in.
Flipping through the black-and-silver-patterned bible in his hand, the bishop spoke with a voice that reverberated through the cathedral,
"Our lord is known as The Fool. Across past, present, and future, he reigns supreme over the spirit world. He is also the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck. A beacon for all in the pursuit of eternity...
"He is compassionate, benevolent, and the savior of this world. He allows us to address him as him instead of Him...
"Our lord resides above both reality and the spirit world. His benevolence extends to Heaven and the land. Beside him stand eight angels...
"The Angel of Mercury is the embodiment of fate, our Lord's most cherished angel. The Angel of Death has followed our Lord for the longest period of time and is the consul of the Underworld. The Angel of Redemption is our Lord's bugle, once taking on the form of Gehrman Sparrow to deliver his revelations. The Angel of Life is the crystallization of wisdom itself, the indestructible spirituality that resides in everyone's body."

Gehrman Sparrow? That adventurer is an angel of Mr. Fool? Lumian was astonished by the revelation.
The giant bishop continued, "There's also the Angel of Retribution beside the Lord's throne. He is the Lord's lightning, the Lord's rage, and the Lord's palm, the judge of all the fallen and the ones who aren't chaste.
"Next to the Angel of Retribution is the Angel of the Holy Spirit, reigning over all spirits and representing our lord in controlling the spirit world.
"In contrast to Them, there are the Angel of Time and the Angel of Stars.
"The Angel of Time was an angel of ancient times. He eventually submitted to our Lord and now strikes the bell of Heaven.
"The Angel of Stars is a witness, a recorder, the eyes and ears of our lord..."
Lumian listened attentively, finding it hard to believe that there were eight angels by The Fool's divine throne.
Wasn't this strength too terrifying?
It seemed no different from an orthodox Church!
Suddenly, Termiboros's magnificent voice resounded, "Do you believe it?"
"Why not?" Lumian replied in a hushed tone, as if reciting passages from the bible.
After all, whose bible, even among the orthodox Churches, didn't have a touch of exaggeration?
Even without embellishments, it was still impressive!

Chapter 292: Communion

Termiboros fell silent.

Lumian continued to listen intently to the bishop's sermon as he recounted the general situation of the Church of The Fool. He discovered that there existed another continent in this world called the Forsaken Land of the Gods—a place cursed and abandoned by the gods Themselves.

Despite the gods turning their backs on the continent, Mr. Fool refused to forsake it. He dispatched the Angel of Redemption—Gehrman Sparrow—to lead the surviving humans from the lost city-states out of the Forsaken Land of the Gods and guide them in rebuilding their homes on the maritime islands.

Consequently, the Church of The Fool's headquarters were established in the New City of Silver in the Sonia Sea.

The other two Holy Lands, New Moon City and Bayam, the capital of the Rorsted Archipelago, were also located in the same area.

Lumian listened with fascination, gaining a fundamental understanding of the Church of The Fool.

Following the sermon, the bishop and a few priests distributed communion.

It consisted of a glass of transparent, colorless liquid and a large fruit shell with charred marks covering it.

Lumian picked up the glass and took a sip. The liquid had a slight sweetness, reminiscent of dairy products but with a more fragrant essence.

Next, he used a wooden spoon to scoop out the food from the huge fruit shell.

As soon as he tasted the food, Lumian's expression turned surprised.

It's meat!

Isn't this a bit extravagant?

Even the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Communion couldn't compare to this. They only had red wine and unfermented flatbread.

Lumian perked up and chewed the food with interest. It was delicious, with a meaty texture and a mix of sweetness and slight sourness, like that of a fruit. Its aroma was entirely different from the usual dishes found in Trier.

While he ate, he listened to the bishop explain the origins of Communion.

It turned out that this was Angel of Redemption Gehrman Sparrow's favorite food during his travels across the land. As the bugle of the Lord, he preached the revelations of the Lord.

The liquid was called Teana, derived from a giant fruit unique to the Rorsted Archipelago, and it was extracted from the pulp.
Having lost most of its pulp, the Teana rind was stuffed with mashed mutton and fish, culminating in the communion, Teativa.
However, transporting such massive fruits from the Rorsted Archipelago to Trier for Communion was impractical. It required crossing three seas, and no matter how unripened the fruit was, it would inevitably rot, wasting valuable resources.
With the help of a particular botanist, the Church of The Fool had cultivated a modified Teana tree that could grow in southern Intis, producing a stronger milky scent.
A delicacy with a maritime charm... If it weren't for the Church of The Fool's inability to preach and proselytize, who knows how many people would convert solely due to the Communion... But that could lead to financial issues as well. Too many believers in The Fool would cause the expenses of Communion to skyrocket...
After pondering the Church of The Fool's finances for a moment, Lumian, who hadn't eaten dinner yet, finished the Teativa clean and gulped down the Teana juice.
"Praise The Fool!" Lumian stood up sincerely and bowed. He slowly left the candlelit cathedral and stepped into the night.
Under the warm glow of gas street lamps, Lumian strolled along the port area, dressed in a linen shirt, black vest, and rolled-up sleeves. His destination was the other side of the docks, where he intended to catch a public carriage to Avenue du Boulevard.
Lavigny had grown quiet, with only occasional groups of sailors passing by, singing or shouting.
All of a sudden, a commotion erupted nearby, followed by a piercing scream.
As the sound echoed through the night, Lumian noticed a figure hurtling towards him at an incredible speed.
Casually, he sidestepped, acting like an innocent bystander.
Yet, if the approaching person happened to be vile or had indeed committed some wrongdoing and was now being chased, Lumian wouldn't mind sticking out his right foot and tripping them, just for the spectacle.
Within seconds, the figure reached the edge of the street lamp's glow, making Lumian's eyebrows twitch in surprise.
So fast!
Clearly not an ordinary human!
With the help of the gas lamps, Lumian got a good look at the figure's appearance.
It wasn't human—it was a monster!
Though its wrinkled head resembled a human's, its dark-green

scales covered its body. Wearing a torn linen shirt and brown pants, its feet lacked shoes, and thin, tough skin membrane grew between its fingers. Slippery dark green mucus oozed over its form, and its palms and mouth were stained with blood.
Having encountered numerous monsters in Cordu's ruins, Lumian remained unperturbed. He only frowned slightly.
It reminds me of those murlocs mentioned in mysticism magazines. Those dark-green scales must provide formidable defense...
As Lumian pondered, the monster noticed him sidestepping and grew more violent and crazed in its expression.
Without warning, it lunged at Lumian.
Reacting swiftly, Lumian arched his body, not backing away, but stepping forward to face the suspected murloc.
Bang!
His right hand, emitting sparks, struck the creature's abdomen.
Then, he swiftly lowered his body, slipping under the armpit of the dark-green-scaled monster, avoiding its counterattack and effectively positioning himself behind the assailant.
Lumian spun around, his arms swinging. His fists, with flickering flames, delivered powerful blows to the back of the suspected murloc, knocking it to the ground.
Blows resounded until Lumian withdrew his hands, ceasing his assault. He observed silently as the struggling body left corrosive marks on the ground.
With a muffled explosion, crimson sparks erupted from the monster's eyes, nose, ears, and mouth. Its body swelled before collapsing, shedding several dark-green scales.
After a few convulsions, it lay still.
Lumian averted his gaze and looked towards the figures chasing after him. He nonchalantly flicked his hands, alleviating the corrosive pain caused by the dark-green liquid.
His injuries were minor. After all, he had delivered a barrage of powerful punches, and his contact with the dark-green scales and viscous liquid had been brief.
Soon, the figures reached the lamp pole.
They were sailors, led by a mixed-blood man from the Southern Continent, sporting braided hair and brownish-red skin.
He appeared to be in his thirties, with thick lips. His eyes first scanned the murloc-like monster lying motionless on the ground, then he looked at Lumian with surprise, suspicion, and fear.
After a few seconds of silence, the sailor with the braided hair spoke with a solemn voice, "This is the murloc we captured at sea. It injured one of our crewmates and managed to escape."

It is indeed a murloc... Did they truly capture it? Why didn't they turn it into various materials and transport it to Trier? Why risk keeping it alive? Lumian silently mused as he asked with a smile, "Are you planning to apologize on its behalf and compensate me for my mental distress to soothe my terrified mind?"
The sailor and his companions exchanged glances, unable to decipher the lad's true intentions.
In the distance, the sound of regimental-like running resonated, accompanied by gunfire.
Patrol soldiers had rushed over upon hearing the scream.
The sailor's heart tightened as he unconsciously grabbed the monster's corpse, closely observing Lumian's reaction. He intended to stop once the other party showed any dissatisfaction.
Simultaneously, he continued, "No problem. We have no problem."
What he meant was that they would provide compensation for Lumian's mental distress.
Lumian sensed that they mainly wanted the Beyonder characteristic produced by the murloc, but the monster was too weak. He wasn't in the mood to discuss how the prize would be divided with them.
It was not worthy of the Shadow Branch at all!
If these individuals, who acted recklessly without concern for covering their tracks, managed to evade pursuit and crossed paths with him again, he could simply demand compensation from them for his mental distress.
As Lumian watched the sailors carry the murloc away, he continued on his way as if nothing had happened.
Before long, several patrolling soldiers caught up with him, examining his condition and inquiring if he had witnessed anything unusual.
Lumian candidly pointed in the direction the sailors had fled.
"I heard a scream and saw a group of people running that way. They were dressed like sailors."
The officer leading the patrol nodded approvingly.
"Thank you for your cooperation."
"No need to thank me. It's what any responsible citizen should do," Lumian replied with a smile.
Soon, the other soldiers discovered traces of corrosion and scales on the ground, along with sticky liquid that hadn't entirely evaporated. They followed the trail towards the docks.
Lumian clicked his tongue and continued on his way towards the public carriage stop.
Clap! Clap! Clap! He heard a soft applause.
Feeling uneasy, Lumian turned his head and saw someone sitting

on a nearby cargo box, seemingly having appeared out of nowhere. The man's eyebrows were charred yellow, and his hair shared the same color. His eyes were dark blue yet radiant. He wore a linen shirt, a brown vest, and a pair of black leather boots hung from his dark brown pants.

Lumian recognized the man and felt alarmed.

Blazing Danitz, a great pirate second only to a few Pirate Kings!

But Lumian calmed down when he recalled the man's other identity: He was no longer a pirate; he was now Mr. Fool's Oracle!

As the holder of a Minor Arcana card, Lumian believed that as long as he revealed his identity, Blazing Danitz wouldn't give him trouble.

Blazing Danitz gazed at Lumian for a few seconds before effortlessly leaping down from the top of the wooden crates.

He chuckled and spoke leisurely, "To be able to swiftly choose the most effective, targeted, and efficient attack method against your prey, perfectly evading the enemy's enhanced scale defense—your combat intelligence is quite impressive. I admire it.

"So, how about it? Are you interested in joining my team and becoming my subordinate?"

Chapter 293: "Pious"

Inviting me to join your team without even checking my background or confirming my strength? Are you that confident, Mr. Fool's Oracle? Lumian couldn't help but criticize, feeling unsure about the whole situation.

He looked at Blazing Danitz and responded with a smile, "No."

Blazing Danitz acknowledged tersely, his voice gaining intensity as if confirming it for the last time.

Lumian slipped his right hand into his pocket, maintaining his smile.

"Not interested."

What a joke. How can I complete the Tarot Club's mission if I join your team?

This requires your consultation with Madam Magician!

Danitz's dark-blue yet bright eyes narrowed slightly, his aura instantly becoming more intense.

Lumian felt as if he were facing a spear or a loaded gun pressed to his forehead. Fear and danger washed over him.

However, he didn't look away and met Blazing Danitz's gaze with a calm determination, as if facing an apex predator.

After a brief silence that filled the air with tension, Blazing Danitz broke into a smile.

"Not bad. You're quite resolute and bold. I admire you even more."

With those words, the former great pirate, now The Fool's Oracle, turned around and strolled towards the well-lit street in the distance.

Confidence naturally breeds resoluteness... Lumian thought silently as he withdrew his right hand from his pocket, revealing a tarot card held between his thumb and index finger.

The tarot card—Seven of Wands!

Though he couldn't fathom Blazing Danitz's impromptu recruitment, he felt somewhat glad to have encountered Mr. Fool's Oracle.

This meant that The Fool Church held substantial strength in Trier.

...

After leaving Lavigny Docks, Lumian hopped onto a public carriage and soon arrived at Avenue du Boulevard. He walked to 19 Rue Scheer and met Mr. K beneath the headquarters of the Psychic organization.

The Aurora Order Oracle remained seated in the red armchair, his face concealed in the deep shadows of his black hood.

His voice rasped as he inquired, "How's your progress in gaining

Gardner Martin's trust?"
Lumian replied calmly, "I've already joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order."
Mr. K fell silent for a moment before asking, "How did you gain Gardner Martin's trust? How did he test you? And how did you pass the test?"
The Aurora Order Oracle altered his usual demeanor, posing three questions at once.
Lumian chuckled.
"Well, there was no need to gain Gardner Martin's trust. Simply joining the Iron and Blood Cross Order earned loyalty."
Upon hearing this, Mr. K, who had been reclining in his chair, sat up straight. The shadows in the basement seemed to stir, almost alive.
With his expertise and knowledge, discerning the hidden meaning behind Lumian's words wasn't difficult for him.
And it undoubtedly spelled danger: Lumian had indeed become a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, pledging his allegiance to them. He was here to report while bringing the powerful figures of the Iron and Blood Cross Order!
Lumian smiled, unfazed by the immense pressure radiating from Mr. K. He proceeded to recount how he informed Gardner Martin that he had become a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac, leading up to the vigil at 13 Avenue du Marché and the formal initiation ceremony.
He didn't hold back the fact that he had engaged in an underground transaction and fled in terror after encountering Supervisor Olson's monstrous creation.
As Lumian finished, Mr. K stood up, excitement in his tone as he verified Lumian's various details at 13 Avenue du Marché repeatedly.
Upon realizing that Lumian had used the honorific name at a crucial moment and received a divine revelation of "don't respond," Mr. K burst into a fit of maniacal laughter.
"Hahaha, hahaha, just as I thought, piousness is the only way out!"
The hooded Oracle's laughter grew wilder, echoing through the basement, making Lumian's eardrums tremble and a faint scent of salt and blood fill the air.
"Hahaha! Hahaha!"
Mr. K laughed so hard he nearly doubled over.
He no longer concealed his condition. The whole basement seemed enveloped in darkness, and he stood as the source of danger behind it all.
After a while, Mr. K paid no mind to Lumian's presence, instead kneeling down, lowering his body to pray almost silently, as if

thanking the Lord that created everything, the omnipotent and omniscient God.
Lumian managed to keep his lips from twitching. Before leaving for Lavigny Docks, he had performed a ritual, praying to The Fool for the angel's protection. He praised the True Creator of the Aurora Order and drew a cross on his chest, following an up-to-down, left-to-right order.
With a sudden display of piousness, Mr. K stood up and said with fervor, "This was all arranged by the Lord. He brought you here to join us."
It depends on which lord you're talking about... Lumian muttered, finding amusement in the situation, and replied humbly, "What He says will come true."
This was one of the religious texts of the Aurora Order taught by Mr. K. Lumian had always regarded it as a sermon praising the deity's strength. He found it quite useful in the present conversation.
The hooded Mr. K nodded, thoroughly satisfied.
"I had arranged for others to approach the exposed members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order before, but they lost contact with me and stopped reporting. They even put me in considerable danger.
"Now I understand why they failed. Their lack of piousness! In the face of danger and corruption, they didn't even think to recite our Lord's honorific name and seek His protection!
"But you, at the critical moment, had only my Lord in your mind. That's the kind of piousness I admire the most.
"That's why you successfully joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order without being corrupted!"
With only faith in a deity left in your mind... *Will this affect your intelligence?* Lumian observed Mr. K, gaining a deeper understanding of his state of mind and way of thinking.
Mr. K paced back and forth in front of Lumian, his excitement palpable in his voice.
"Based on the information you brought back, I now have a better understanding of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's problems. I have a new insight into their current situation and their intentions.
"I can say you've completed half of the mission I assigned you. Next, you need to investigate the source of the abnormality, the exact timeline, and their roadmap for inciting the riot.
"If they find a way to enter Fourth Epoch Trier or a passageway, you must inform me immediately. Don't let them succeed."
Mr. K pondered for a few seconds and said, "The first option is to take out my finger and ignite it. As long as the environment isn't special, I can sense it and roughly understand the cause.

"If that doesn't work, pray to my Lord immediately, just like this time."
"Alright," Lumian agreed.
When the time came, he might have to try contacting Madam Magician. It seemed like he would be very busy.
After assigning the subsequent mission, Mr. K looked at Lumian in a friendly tone and asked,
"Since you've completed half of the mission and brought back crucial information, I can't be stingy with the rewards. Tell me, what do you want?"
"I want a mystical item of bizarre nature. If you don't have it, a corresponding Beyonder characteristic will do. I'll find an Artisan to craft it myself," Lumian answered without hesitation.
Mr. K let out a chuckle.
"You deserve that. Come back in three days. I'll give you a few choices, or I'll offer what I think suits you best."
"Thank you, Mr. K," Lumian expressed his sincere gratitude.
This was much more generous than what the Iron and Blood Cross Order offered!
"It's not me you should be thanking, but the Lord," Mr. K replied with a smile.
Helpless, Lumian drew the cross again.
"Praise be to you, the creator of all things. Praise be to you, who carries the burdens of the world's sins."
Mr. K chimed in, praising the True Creator.
"Unfortunately, our Aurora Order doesn't have things like godfathers or godchildren. Otherwise, I'd be more than willing to baptize you again."
Why do so many people express their admiration by wanting to be someone else's father? Lumian found it amusing.
...
In high spirits after Mr. K's assurance, Lumian made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré. He headed straight to the basement bar and ordered a glass of the unique textured distilled lemon liquor. As he chatted with the others, he found amusement in Charlie's return, spreading all sorts of rumors.
Meanwhile, intermittent singing and clapping rhythms filled the air, creating a lively atmosphere that lasted until the early hours of the morning. When the customers, who had to work at dawn, finally departed to their residences, the bar quieted down.
Lumian realized he had been spending too many nights at Auberge du Coq Doré lately, neglecting his sleep at Salle de Bal Brise. He decided it was time to balance things out and head there next.
As he left Auberge du Coq Doré and walked along Rue Anarchie,

where there were no gas street lamps, he noticed a figure emerging from the dark shadows ahead.
The person was almost as tall as Lumian, with broad shoulders and a muscular build, dressed in a linen shirt, a brown jacket, and a brownish-yellow wide-brimmed hat.
Gray hair adorned their head, and dark eyes stared intently. The man's hairy skin added to his rugged appearance, giving off a wild sense of beauty.
Having halted Lumian, the man, whose age was difficult to gauge from his appearance, lifted his chin slightly and inquired, "Are you Ciel Dubois?"
Do you truly think yourself worthy of addressing me by my name? Lumian contemplated responding in a similar manner, uncertain of the man's intentions, and sensing a hint of arrogance. Thus, he chose to pretend.
He asked cautiously, "And who might you be?"
The man remained composed, showing no signs of being affected. With a cold expression, he pressed on, "Tell me who the boss of your Savoie Mob is."

Chapter 294: Beyonder

You don't even know who's running the show for our Savoie Mob? And you're coming to me with this question? You must be clueless about the real deal. Our Boss is the Commanding Officer of the secret organization called the Iron and Blood Cross Order, and we're just a small part of the whole setup, Lumian thought, sliding his right hand into his pocket.

He quickly considered three possibilities.

First, Gardner Martin used the Savoie Mob for his secret missions, like smuggling some bizarre stuff through "Rat" Christo. Having been detected by someone or some faction, they now wanted to dig into the mob and expose the mastermind behind it.

Second, some members of the Savoie Mob must have offended the wrong people, and now the consequences were knocking at their door.

Third, after the Poison Spur Mob got wiped out, the Savoie Mob expanded rapidly, attracting attention from certain factions.

Lumian quickly dismissed the first two options. Whether it was some secret getting leaked or someone causing offense, he wasn't going to be the one facing questions about the identity of the Savoie Mob's Boss!

Usually, whoever did something secretive would get a visit from the investigators. Similarly, if someone offended another, they'd be targeted, or the leader shielding them. Lumian had never truly been involved in the Savoie Mob's clandestine affairs, nor had he recently defended any subordinates.

The person standing across from him was directly probing about the identity of the Savoie Mob's Boss. It wasn't about which individual belonged to the mob or some specific incident in the past.

Based on this, Lumian strongly suspected that some faction or individual had taken an interest in the Savoie Mob and planned to incorporate them.

Of course, he couldn't dismiss the possibility that a rival mob had teamed up with a powerful being to seek help in taking down the Savoie Mob's Boss.

Yet, in either case, they seemed to have a shallow understanding of the Savoie Mob. They didn't even know the superficial identity of Gardner Martin. All they knew was the most famous member of the mob in recent times. They had just asked about him and paid him a "visit."

In other words, they are treating the Savoie Mob as a regional mob with only a few Beyonders. Sending real powerhouses to deal with

such a mob is clearly impractical, and they probably can't afford to hire them either. Even a Mid-Sequence Beyonder is highly esteemed; it doesn't go beyond Sequence 6. Lumian made this rough judgment in just a couple of seconds.
Seeing Lumian remaining silent and not reaching for his weapon, the tall man with bushy hair, dark eyes, and a brownish-yellow wide-brimmed hat let out a cold snort. His expression and eyes revealed a clear sense of danger.
Almost simultaneously, Lumian felt the darkness around him grow heavier, swallowing up the faint glow of distant street lamps and the crimson moonlight from the sky.
The darkness condensed like frost, slowly but firmly seeping into Lumian's skin, flesh, and bones, causing an uncontrollable fear to well up within him.
Is that all? Lumian, who had been through major situations before, scoffed inwardly.
Gazing at the muscular man with gray hair, donning a linen shirt and a brown jacket, Lumian feigned a twinge of fear and blurted out, "It's Gardner Martin! Gardner Martin, a member of the Savoie Chamber of Commerce!"
The man nodded, pleased, and pressed on, "Where does he usually reside?"
"Lion" Ciel, the ruthless, crazed, and powerful mob leader, is no different from other mobsters!
They only know how to bully the weak and rely on their mob's backing to take on rival mobs. When facing genuinely formidable foes and simple dark-type spells, their timidity and cowardice become evident!
Lumian swallowed hard and managed to say, "He lives at 11 Rue des Fontaines."
At that moment, Lumian shook himself out of his daze.
"Let me tell you, our boss is a member of a secret organization. His strength is even more terrifying than you can imagine!"
A member of a secret organization? The broad-shouldered man was momentarily taken aback before breaking into a smile.
This was truly an unexpected windfall!
"Lion" Ciel is even more timid than I thought. He even spilled such vital information!
The man lifted his chin and sneered with a deep voice, "Well, did I mention that I, too, am part of a secret organization? A very ancient one."
With those words, the surrounding darkness seemed to tighten its grip.
Really? I can't quite tell... Lumian pondered the idea of luring this

man and the faction behind him to confront the Boss. He wanted to see what would happen when the two secret organizations clashed, hoping to expose more of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's secrets.
After a brief silence, Lumian couldn't bear the weight of the darkness any longer. His right hand and arm, tucked into his pocket, trembled slightly.
"I don't know, I don't know. The Boss didn't tell us the exact name!"
The man scrutinized Lumian for a few seconds and concluded that he shouldn't know the details of the secret organization.
For a regional mob like theirs, the Boss is at most a member of some secret society.
The man couldn't help but smirk sinisterly.
"Then take me to 11 Rue des Fontaines."
As soon as he spoke, he lunged at Lumian, moving with such speed that he left afterimages.
Almost simultaneously, his nails shot out, long and sharp, flickering with a metallic light that exuded a dark sheen.
Yet, Lumian showed no fear, offered no resistance, and didn't panic. He also moved to evade the attack, all while extending his right hand from the depths of his pocket.
In his hand, he held a blazing white fireball the size of a fist, sending it hurtling toward his assailant like a gift.
Fireball... Blazing white... The man with short gray hair on his face and the back of his hands found himself too close to turn around due to his speed. As these thoughts raced through his mind, he collided with the condensed, blazing-white fireball.
Boom!
Amidst the muffled explosion, the man's abdomen burst into a bloody mess, emitting a distinct charred smell.
After the other party inquired about the Savoie Mob's boss, Lumian discreetly tucked his right hand into his pocket. However, it wasn't to draw a weapon or guard against attacks. Instead, he used his clothes as cover to steadily conjure crimson flames in his palm. Layer by layer, he compressed them to their utmost, turning the flames into a blazing white. The explosive power was on par with a Giant Fireball, but even more concentrated, capable of burning through skin.
If the enemy's speed hadn't exceeded Lumian's expectations, he would have had a high chance of witnessing the enemy's neck exploding upon impact.
Amidst the rumbling, the man was sent flying, and Lumian was affected by the aftershocks, stumbling backward and tumbling a few times.

Both of them got up simultaneously. Lumian's shirt and vest bore burn marks, and many parts of his skin were damaged.
He saw an irregular, gaping wound on the man's abdomen, with blood-stained intestines flowing out and being stuffed back into place. The surface was marked with fractures and charred spots.
Despite the severe injury, the man didn't lose mobility. As he pressed his abdomen to prevent his intestines and other internal organs from spilling out, he let out a low growl of pain, anger, and violence.
Accompanied by the growl, short gray fur sprouted from his body, transforming him into a towering wolf.
His severed intestines began to writhe, attempting to reconnect. His charred skin slowly healed, and he forcefully closed the huge crack in his abdomen with his palm. Flesh and blood intertwined, bit by bit.
What potent vitality... Lumian sighed from the bottom of his heart at the sight.
He realized that given enough time, the other party would likely recover!
The other party's behavior and state reminded Lumian of a few passages recorded in Aurore's grimoires:
"Werewolf, a Sequence 7 of the Prisoner pathway, a category under Mutants. During the full moon or when they nearly lose control of their emotions, they will be controlled by their bloodthirsty and murderous desires, involuntarily transforming into a true werewolf.
"They possess terrifying strength, agility, and speed, and their self-recovery abilities are outstanding. Their claws and teeth are sturdy and sharp, and they are venomous. They are equivalent to Beyonder weapons of the same Sequence, capable of destroying thinner steel plates.
"They also know a few dark-type spells, capable of turning ordinary humans into puppet monsters with short lives.
"Werewolves often appear in the Southern Continent. They are often associated with various terrorist activities in the Northern Continent..."
I actually encountered a Werewolf Beyonder... Lumian didn't give the other party time to recover from his injuries. Crimson Fire Ravens materialized behind him, spiraling towards their target.
The Werewolf didn't sit idle either. Clutching his stomach to suppress the wound, he approached Lumian with extraordinary speed.
Most of the Fire Ravens' initial lock-on missed, but a few made minor changes in direction and landed on the target one after

another, causing continuous rumbling.
The Werewolf suffered several more wounds, leaving him charred and blood-red.
Relying on his potent recovery abilities, he swiftly closed the distance between him and Lumian, disregarding his injuries. He intended to engage in close combat with the Pyromaniac, who excelled in spells, and tear him to pieces with his sharp and venomous claws.
At some point, the darkness around Lumian further encroached on him, causing him to feel an eerie chill on this summer night and slightly affecting him.
In an instant, crimson flames erupted from his body, enveloping him in scorching warmth.
The very next second, Lumian turned around and fled, dodging the Werewolf's claws.
This made the Werewolf, whose mind was filled with bloodthirsty and murderous desires, feel his adversary's fear. He believed that his target had already gone all out and lacked experience in such battles.
He chased after him and caught up to Lumian in a few swift strides.

Chapter 295: Brains Are Important

Sensing the swipe that carried the scent of blood and char behind him, Lumian swiftly pivoted and darted into the alley leading to Rue du Rossignol.

The Werewolf's pitch-black eyes were bloodshot, and his severe injuries fueled his anger and desire to kill, overpowering most of his thoughts. He forcefully turned around and sprinted into the alley after Lumian.

Seeing Lumian vault over a barricade up ahead, he followed suit and leaped up as well.

In the next instant, he caught sight of an uncovered entrance to the sewers. Iron-black stairs led straight into the depths.

Lumian deftly stepped on the edge of the sewer entrance and jumped over the "natural" trap.

Bam! The Werewolf crashed into the sewers, finding himself halfway in. His wounds worsened, and his head spun.

Lumian seized the moment to turn around and conjure crimson Fire Ravens, sending them spiraling towards the Werewolf, who was stuck at the sewers entrance.

Amidst a muffled rumble, the crimson flaming ravens engulfed the area, setting the Werewolf's gray fur on fire, scorching patches of his skin, and tearing more flesh.

The Werewolf exerted strength with both hands and finally managed to leap out of the sewers. Lumian took the opportunity to flee, having successfully dealt a blow.

The Werewolf grew even angrier. All he wanted was to tear Lumian apart and spill his innards to the street dogs.

With a swoosh, Lumian, who had rushed to the alley exit, turned at high speed and sprinted to the left.

The Werewolf caught up in a few strides and followed the target's escape route.

However, a nearly one-meter tall barricade emerged in the darkness ahead of him. Lumian, already prepared, reached out and pressed down, using the situation to somersault and jump over.

The Werewolf realized it too late and didn't have time for other strategies. He could only choose between hastily jumping up or crashing straight into the barricade.

Exerting strength in his legs, he attempted to leap to the top of the barricade, but his forward momentum couldn't be stopped. Before he could fully ascend, his feet caught onto the obstacle.

Thud!

The Werewolf tumbled off the barricade; his fall made him see

stars.
Lumian halted once more. With one hand in his pocket, he gazed at the enemy.
Around him, a new wave of Fire Ravens condensed and flew towards the base of the barricade.
The Werewolf tried his best to roll, but he was still struck by at least ten flaming ravens. The wound on his abdomen, which no longer had pressure on it, reopened, and blood-colored intestines flowed out.
Only then did the Werewolf realize that he had fallen into the other party's trap. He regained some of his rationality and assessed his weak body and unstable condition.
He extinguished the flames over his body and struggled to his feet, attempting to escape.
At that moment, Lumian's mocking voice echoed in his ears.
"Didn't your mommy tell you not to fight in an environment familiar to Hunters? You actually dared to pursue me on Rue Anarchie and the surrounding areas. I can only say that brains are important, but you don't have any."
The Werewolf's mind buzzed, and he became abnormally infuriated.
He willingly sacrificed his rationality and erupted with desire, bolstering his body in all aspects.
He had become a Lunatic!
He pursued Lumian once more.
Occasionally, Lumian would abruptly halt and counterattack. Other times, he would sneak under a stone statue's arm from a corner. When the Werewolf slammed into an obstacle, Lumian would turn around and unleash a volley of crimson Fire Ravens. Sometimes, he would feign entering Underground Trier but lie in ambush, waiting for the incoming attack.
As the pursuit continued, the Werewolf finally reached his limit, his body teetering on the brink of collapse.
Regaining his senses from his frenzied state, he felt a strong premonition of danger. All he wanted was to leave this area and escape Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.
At that moment, Lumian halted, as if he had sensed something. He turned around and smiled.
He watched as the Werewolf fled much slower than before while condensing a blazing white spear in his hand.
Lumian swung his body and hurled the flaming spear.
A blazing white stream of light streaked through the air, piercing the Werewolf's ravaged body, pinning him to the ground, and setting him ablaze.

Amidst the sudden blaze, Lumian walked toward the enemy with one hand in his pocket.
Crimson Fire Ravens materialized behind him, whistling and spiraling as they approached the Werewolf. They burrowed into his wounds, destroying his heart, lungs, and other organs.
By the time Lumian reached his target, the Mutant was no longer breathing—he was dead.
His eyes were wide open, filled with regret and fear.
Why'd you have to attack me? If you needed something, you could've just gone to the Boss of our Savoie Mob, couldn't you?
Lumian shook his head while looking down at the Werewolf. Did you plan on turning me into a puppet for the assassination of Gardner Martin? Did you really think so low of mobsters? Your confidence made you arrogant.
Earlier, Lumian prepared for a tough battle. He had even prepared for a Sequence 6. His escape route was always near Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Once there, he could get Franca's attention and have her secretly use the enemy's blood to cast a fatal curse.
Lumian considered using the explosion caused by a fireball on Avenue du Marché to create a commotion and scare the enemy away if capturing the target proved difficult even with teamwork.
But the enemy's madness and desire to kill made Lumian doubt if he could think rationally and end the battle quickly to escape the pursuit of official Beyonders. He himself had to hold on until dawn arrived.
Squatting down, Lumian searched the Werewolf's clothes, finding only 3 verl d'or coins, burnt banknotes, and a wallet without anything useful.
Have you never considered bribing me? Do you only want to rely on your strength to intimidate me? Lumian cursed, his heart aching.
He wasn't too disappointed as he knew the chances of this Werewolf being a bestowed were slim. Soon, it could secrete a Sequence 7 Beyonder characteristic that included Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 Beyonder characteristics, worth 30,000 to 40,000 verl d'or, or even more. He could use it to complement the Shadow Branch, create mystical items, or exchange it for more suitable Beyonder characteristics.
Considering the relatively weak explosions he caused, Lumian didn't linger on the street. After briefly dealing with the Werewolf's corpse, he picked him up and brought him to the back door of Salle de Bal Brise.
Sarkota and the other members of the Savoie Mob were no

strangers to destroying corpses, quickly placing the body inside a bag and sending people to clean up the blood along the way.
Lumian tossed the body bag into the carriage belonging to Salle de Bal Brise, fully intending to find Gardner Martin that very night.
During the journey, he opened the body bag several times and finally noticed a blackish-green light secreting from the corpse, which merged with a sharp canine fang.
After a few seconds, Lumian had obtained this strange black-green fang.
After a moment's consideration, he decided to keep the fang in the body bag and see what Gardner Martin would do.
Based on the Commanding Officer's behavior, Lumian knew he would undoubtedly reward him when the time came. He might hand over the Werewolf Beyonder characteristic, switch it to another one, or purchase it at market value.
In any case, Lumian was ready to be honest about it.
Around 1 a.m., Salle de Bal Brise's carriage stopped at 11 Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. Lumian unceremoniously pulled the rope beside the iron fence door, causing the chimes to reverberate through the grayish-white three-story villa.
Before long, a valet of Southern Continent descent arrived and opened the door, though he looked displeased at being woken up. When he saw Lumian's charred and tattered clothes and the body bag he dragged behind him, his attitude changed to that of a courteous servant.
Lumian brought the body bag into the villa and saw Faustino, the butler, who was also a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
After tying his bow tie, Faustino stared at Lumian and the body bag for a few seconds before asking in surprise, "What's this?"
"A strange fellow," Lumian replied with a smile.
Faustino didn't inquire further and led Lumian into the activity room on the first floor.
There, Gardner Martin, donning a dark-blue silk robe, sat in a recliner and asked with a smile, "Who's in the body bag? For you to rush here overnight, it doesn't seem simple."
Lumian untied the body bag and dumped the Werewolf's corpse and the strange black-green fang onto the carpet in the activity room.
Gardner Martin's expression turned serious at a single glance.
"A Werewolf..."
Lumian chuckled. "He came to me to inquire about the identity of the Boss of our Savoie Mob. He even wanted to control me and turn me into a puppet."

Gardner Martin nodded slowly and said, "And?"
"And then?" Lumian raised his eyebrows and replied with a smile, "Then I killed him."
Upon hearing this, Faustino, the butler standing beside the Commanding Officer, glanced at the Werewolf's corpse on the ground and then at Lumian, whose clothes were clearly charred and torn. His expression was no longer calm and composed.
Gardner Martin's eyes narrowed. After a few seconds of silence, he sighed and said, "Unfortunately, you don't know how to channel spirits; we missed out on a lot of information."
Lumian wanted to say, "Perhaps I need a mystical item that can channel spirits," but he was worried that it would take up a portion of the reward and cause the Shadow Branch to lose its match.
Gardner Martin continued, "I'll arrange for follow-up investigations and responses. Don't worry about this for the time being. I'll inform you when you need to carry out your mission."
"What's he up to? He doesn't seem simple." Lumian glanced at the Werewolf's corpse and deliberately expressed his confusion.
Gardner Martin shook his head.
"I can't be sure yet." He then looked at Lumian and asked with a smile, "Do you want this Werewolf fang or something else?"
"What are the choices?" Lumian didn't hold back.

Chapter 296: Request

Gardner Martin was well accustomed to Lumian's straightforwardness. He gave a slight nod and said, "If you want a quick trade, I have three items of equal value to the Werewolf fang."

"The first is the Shadow Bracelet, a mystical item that lets you conceal yourself within larger shadows. It can summon a Shadow Servant with a few special abilities and can bring shadows to life to restrain targets to some extent.

"It's a foreboding item. More than a third of those who've used it have gone mad, while another third mysteriously disappeared without it, never to be seen again. Many of those who remain seem fine, but they often complain of tinnitus and hallucinate sounds.

"In recent years, unless there are special circumstances, no one has dared to use this mystical item."

Lumian expressed his confusion through his gaze: Then why are you offering it to me? Do I look like a lunatic or an idiot to you?

Gardner Martin smiled and explained, "I'm one of the few people who hasn't encountered problems with the Shadow Bracelet. I know a way to weaken its negative effects, but I can only tell you if you choose it."

When did you start hallucinating that there's nothing wrong with you? Lumian suppressed his concerns and held his tongue.

He thought that Gardner Martin, who had been corrupted by the abnormality at 13 Avenue du Marché, might not be any better than those who had gone mad or disappeared mysteriously.

According to Madam Magician's description of corruption, the person standing before him might not be the same Gardner Martin as before.

Gardner Martin glanced at Lumian and smiled. "Actually, there's no need to be so reserved in front of me. That won't make you seem like a Hunter who hasn't advanced to Sequence 6. If you say something that might 'provoke' me, I'll probably just respond with sarcasm. Look, isn't Albus still alive and well?"

"Yes, CO Sir," Lumian replied, not revealing the secrets that couldn't be disclosed to the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

Gardner Martin got up from his recliner and continued, "The second item is a Beyonder characteristic left behind by a Spirit Medium. Do you know what Beyonder characteristics are?"

Lumian answered calmly, "Killing a Beyonder creature will yield one of the main ingredients for concocting a potion. Killing a Beyonder will definitely yield the corresponding items, just like the

transparent golden-red ball from 'Hammer' Ait and this Werewolf fang."
"I believe these are Beyonder characteristics. They all correspond to a potion. There's no need to gather additional main ingredients, right?"
Gardner Martin nodded approvingly. "That's right. Your judgment is accurate."
Gardner Martin didn't go into detail about the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility, as if he believed it involved many secrets Lumian couldn't grasp at the moment.
With his hands clasped behind his back, Gardner Martin paced in front of the unlit fireplace.
"Spirit Medium. From its name, you can roughly guess the abilities of the mystical item created from it. Of course, what you obtain depends on an Artisan's ability.
"If I'm not mistaken, it should be an Eye of Death, allowing one to disguise as a zombie and endure the effects of decay, cold, death, and other auras. It can also identify the weaknesses of undead creatures and directly communicate with natural spirits and various undead creatures in the real world, using them for various magical effects. If you're lucky enough, you might even have all of those abilities.
"Try not to carry this Beyonder characteristic with you. Otherwise, you'll become the target of surrounding natural spirits and undead creatures. You'll never know when you might suffer a bizarre attack."
Impressive as it sounds, it's somewhat similar to a Contractee—relying on other creatures to gain strength... Lumian pondered for a few seconds and asked, "And the third?"
Gardner Martin settled back into his recliner.
"It's also a Beyonder characteristic. If you carry it, you'll find yourself rather lucky. This will be reflected in the details of various matters.
"The corresponding Sequence name is Lucky One, but you have to remember that reveling in luck is often a precursor to disaster. Also, it might allow you to see things you shouldn't see."
Sequence 7 of the Monster pathway? Lumian recalled the contents of Aurore's grimoires.
The Monster pathway, also known as the Fate pathway, was a pathway known for its high spiritual perception and close connection to fate.
Lumian chuckled and said, "The Lucky One ultimately transformed into a Beyonder characteristic in an unlucky manner? What an ironic joke."

Gardner Martin agreed. "Don't underestimate bad luck, and don't rely on luck. Otherwise, you may also become a Beyonder characteristic."
"Very philosophical." Lumian took note of the words filled with experience and lessons learned.
He carefully recalled Gardner Martin's introduction and realized that he wasn't stingy with information about the corresponding Sequences.
Merely the descriptions of the abilities of a Spirit Medium and Lucky One could fetch a good price at many mystical gatherings.
Gardner Martin pointed at the blackish-green fang on the ground.
"It's a Werewolf Beyonder characteristic. Once transformed into a mystical item, it should provide powerful self-healing abilities, allow transformation into a werewolf, and grant a short burst of power at the expense of rationality.
"But, as you saw, Werewolves are always affected by killing and bloodlust. During the full moon or Blood Moon, there's the latent danger of losing your mind and control.
"Have you decided which item to choose? If you choose the Beyonder characteristics, I can help you contact an Artisan and assist with the production fee. It's the reward you deserve for your contribution tonight."
Is the Artisan you're hiring a Saint? How will you react if you discover that I'm hiding a Shadow Branch? Lumian wondered, seriously considering his options.
First, he eliminated the Shadow Bracelet, suspected to be a mystical item of Mr. K's pathway. Mr. K might offer similar but better options in his rewards soon. Besides, the negative effects of the Shadow Bracelet were too perilous. Even if Gardner Martin claimed he could weaken them, Lumian didn't dare take the risk.
Most importantly, such a risk was pointless.
A Spirit Medium can compensate for my shortcomings, but it doesn't complement the Shadow Branch. I can't create a mystical item with the effect of lingering human-ghost emotions. Yes, some characteristics overlap with a Contractee...
Lucky One can make the Shadow Branch always trigger suitable desires? The Werewolf's rationality sacrifice and the influence of being murderous and bloodthirsty are quite compatible with the Shadow Branch. I wonder what kind of mystical item it would produce...
After careful consideration that spanned a few minutes, Lumian made his decision.
"I want Lucky One."
The main reason he gave up the Werewolf Beyonder characteristic

was its potential negative effect of losing rationality.
Others might find ways to reduce the impact, using it only when facing enemies or avoiding certain lunar phases. But Lumian couldn't take that risk. Losing his mind even once could lead to Termiboros exploiting him and causing the seal to lose its balance.
Furthermore, he belonged to the Inevitability domain as a Beyonder in some way. In the future, when he reached a higher Sequence, he might be able to enhance the mystical item's effects through the Lucky One trait.
As for seeing things he shouldn't, Lumian already had the Mystery Prying Glasses, so having something similar didn't bother him.
Gardner Martin seemed surprised. He had expected Lumian to choose between the Spirit Medium Beyonder characteristic and Shadow Bracelet.
However, he quickly composed himself and didn't inquire further. With a smile, he said, "Humans are obsessed with good luck."
The Boss of the Savoie Mob, Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, briefly left the activity room and went upstairs.
A few minutes later, he returned with a transparent glass jar, once used to hold sweets.
Inside the jar lay a mercury-colored eyeball, swiveling left and right as if it were alive.
"To carry and store it, place it in a narrow dark space," Gardner Martin instructed as he wrapped the jar in black cloth.
Handing the item to Lumian, he added, "Change the jar every seven days."
"Thank you, CO Sir." Lumian put the glass jar containing the Lucky One Beyonder characteristic into his pocket.
Gardner Martin didn't wonder why Lumian didn't ask him to contact an Artisan. The true effects of a mystical item were something the wielder wanted to keep as secret as possible. Seeking an unknown Artisan was more conducive to secrecy.
Just as these thoughts crossed his mind, Lumian brought up the matter himself.
"CO Sir, I'd like to exchange the free Artisan service for other rewards."
Curious, Gardner Martin asked, "What reward do you desire?"
A grin crept across Lumian's face. "Help me find someone."
"Who?" Gardner Martin had a hunch.
Lumian's expression turned serious.
"Guillaume Bénet.
"Since you know I'm from Cordu, you must have seen the padre's wanted poster.
"I've been tracking him, hoping to apprehend the heretic who

caused disaster for me. I just received information that he might appear in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge next week. I'd like to request your assistance in locating him, CO Sir."
Gardner Martin burst into laughter.
"I thought you wanted to handle it yourself, enduring pain, tracking alone, and seeking revenge in secret.
"Nicely done. You've learned to leverage an organization's strength sooner than I expected. That's something a Hunter must understand.
"I agree to your request."

Chapter 297: Informant Contract

On his way back to the market district, Lumian leaned against the carriage wall, pondering the whole situation once more. He realized he had overlooked a problem.

A Sequence 7 mysteriously vanishes during a relatively simple mission, and it is now suspected to be dead. Would the secret organization behind him just pretend that nothing had happened? *Would they realize the truth tonight and launch an investigation?*

As a Conspirer, there's no way the Boss wouldn't have thought of this. Yet, he didn't warn me and allowed me to go home alone... *Is he using me as bait?*

Yes, the secret organization behind the Werewolf might not take action tonight. As long as they keep their wits about them, they should realize that their missing subordinate is a huge problem. It seems the Savoie Mob is not as simple as it appears. If I were in their shoes, I'd hold back for a while until further events unfold. Then, I'd use the chaos to figure out the true situation of the Savoie Mob.

Of course, if they have an angel's protection and can get Him to temporarily descend upon Salle de Bal Brise, they can do whatever they want...

Now that I think about it, although that Werewolf was arrogant, he wasn't that stupid or reckless. He's just average. He must have captured some ordinary members of the Savoie Mob beforehand and roughly figured out the situation of the few leaders before targeting the leader who recently joined the Savoie Mob—me. Logically speaking, I wouldn't have been involved in the Savoie Mob's core matters. I wouldn't know many secrets, and I won't cause too many implications...

Furthermore, ordinary members of the Savoie Mob don't know that I've advanced to Pyromaniac. Judging from my recent combat records, that fellow believes he can easily handle me. In close combat, a Werewolf with stronger self-healing abilities, faster speed, greater strength, and nimble reactions, possessing claws equivalent to Beyonder weapons, is far superior to a Provoker...

By the time Lumian returned to Salle de Bal Brise, he had already sorted out the situation. He touched Mr. K's finger in his pocket and entered the room on the second floor, seemingly oblivious. He washed up and went to bed.

...

As the sun began to rise, Jenna hurriedly left 17 Rue Pasteur in Quartier du Jardin Botanique, a piece of toast in her mouth.

Last night, she had returned to visit her brother. She tossed and

turned in the bed that she had shared with her mother until midnight before finally falling asleep. She woke up early in the morning, not wanting to run into her neighbors who might inquire about the wanted criminal named "Celia Bello."
It was still dark, and the streets were mostly empty. Jenna passed by the few vendors and passersby and turned into an alley near Rue Saint-Hilaire, which was even more desolate.
And then, she saw a familiar figure approaching.
He was a man with brown skin, thick lips, and light-yellow hair neatly combed. He had native blood from the Southern Continent and an inconspicuous piece of tape on the bridge of his nose. Wearing a light-colored shirt and a yellow vest, a golden Sun Sacred Emblem was pinned to his chest.
Sun Sacred Emblem... Jenna's heart skipped a beat as she remembered who he was.
He was a Beyonder from the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, once responsible for protecting Hugues Artois!
Jenna instinctively wanted to turn and leave the alley, but she noticed another Beyonder from the Eternal Blazing Sun Church standing guard at the alley's exit! He too was an Eternal Blazing Sun Church Beyonder who had protected Hugues Artois!
Valentine's eyes were bluer than lake water, and his expression was cold.
Jenna stopped turning and held her breath. Her right hand rested on her waist, ready to draw her hidden revolver and dagger in an instant.
Seeing her cautious stance, Imre quickly called out, "Relax! We're not here to arrest you."
Recalling Franca's analysis about the possibility of the official Beyonders making her an informant, Jenna calmed down a bit, but still eyed Imre and Valentine warily.
Imre flashed a friendly smile and said, "We do eliminate wild Beyonders, but that doesn't mean we don't have options."
"Don't be intimidated by the rumors about the stake. This is Trier. Wild Beyonders who aren't truly sinful won't face such a fate. Of course, similar cases happen in other provinces, villages, small cities, and towns."
Jenna grew more certain of the official Beyonders' intentions. She feigned inexperience and asked, "What do you want from me?"
Imre smiled.
"We hope you can cooperate with us.
"In fact, if we hadn't deliberately let you go, you would have been arrested long ago."
Jenna pondered for a moment, thinking about how she managed

to lead a peaceful life after assassinating Hugues Artois.
After a while, she asked hesitantly, "Cooperate?"
Imre smiled and nodded.
"Let me introduce myself. I'm Imre, a Purifier of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Inquisition. This is my colleague, Valentine.
"Not every wild Beyonder earns our goodwill and the chance to cooperate. We've looked into your situation and confirmed that you're also a believer of God and haven't committed any serious offenses. Moreover, after gaining superpowers, you restrained yourself and didn't misuse your abilities, except for assassinating Hugues Artois.
"We understand your hatred and your choice. After all, he's a heretic who deserves death. Anyone has the right to purify him on behalf of God. You must know that if we hadn't arranged it and deliberately turned a blind eye to your actions, you wouldn't have escaped from the member of parliament's office."
Jenna nodded slowly, showing that she had realized it later.
Imre continued, "Because you're a believer who inherently stays true to yourself and doesn't abuse your abilities, we want to invite you to be our informant and provide us with corresponding intel.
"Don't worry, we won't force you to betray your friends. We just want you to keep an eye out for anything that might bring disaster to the market district and Trier."
Stay true to myself and refrain from abusing my abilities... I used to be like that in the past, barely so in the present, but will I be in the future? Jenna thought, mocking herself. She wanted to tell them that they had arrived too late, and she was no longer the same person.
After a moment's hesitation, she said, "I also live in the market district. I'd be glad to help resolve any issues that might harm this place through you."
She tactfully expressed her willingness to cooperate.
At that moment, Jenna felt inspired and blurted out, "I discovered something two days ago!"
"What?" Imre glanced at his teammate Valentine in surprise.
They hadn't expected their newly-hired informant to provide intel right away.
Jenna recounted how she'd attended a mysterious gathering where she heard about the disappearance of the Deep Valley Cloister's gatekeeper. Upon accepting the corresponding commission, she described how she and her companion accidentally stumbled upon a cybernetic-eyed monk entering a nearby quarry and opening a secret cave filled with numerous human arms and legs.
Throughout the process, she kept her companion's identity and

name, as well as the time and location of the mysticism gathering, hidden.
Imre and Valentine were a mix of joy and solemnity.
They were delighted by the unexpected gain, but the peculiarity of the situation also troubled them.
"Very good. That's the kind of cooperation we need," Imre praised Jenna after she finished speaking.
Valentine nodded reluctantly.
It wasn't that he didn't see the need for such an informant; the incident with Hugues Artois had changed his perception of wild Beyonders significantly. However, he was a bit emotional as Imre could have convinced Celia Bello alone, yet he insisted on involving Valentine.
After praising the morning sun, he could have gone home to rest and enjoy breakfast with his family.
Nevertheless, Imre's reasoning was sound.
According to the rules, it was best to have two Purifiers present when developing informants, especially Beyonders who belonged to a few pathways like Demoness.
Imre explained that over the years, many Purifiers had fallen into the trap of being seduced while developing Demonesses as informants or pursuing them. This led them to fall in love, betray the Church, and lose control amid the torment of faith.
Hence, having two Purifiers to supervise each other in such cases was essential.
Though Jenna was still an Assassin and had plenty to go before qualifying as a true Demoness of Pleasure, one couldn't be careless about such matters, especially with a rare female Assassin.
After the praise, Imre added, "Cooperation means both sides can benefit from this matter. We'll reward you accordingly based on the intel you provide. You can choose from money, materials, knowledge, weapons, and more."
Jenna hesitated for a moment before asking, "Will there be a reward for what I just said?"
"What do you want?" Imre inquired.
"The main ingredient of the Instigator potion," Jenna replied without hesitation,
having already received the potion formula from Franca.
Imre wasn't surprised. He nodded and said, "We'll discuss it after we verify the authenticity and importance of this intel."
"Alright," Jenna replied, not too disappointed as she didn't hold out much hope.
Imre produced an ordinary-looking piece of white paper with a few simple clauses written on it, outlining what he had just said.

The terms didn't demand Jenna's faith to be constantly with the Eternal Blazing Sun, but they required her not to believe in an evil god.
Being experienced, Jenna read the terms over and over again until she confirmed that there were no issues, and then she readily signed her real name.
She watched Imre take out a fountain pen made of pure gold and sign his name. He then quickly wrote a few bright red words in the Notary position.
A sun-like glow briefly enveloped the contract before vanishing.
After bidding farewell to Imre and Valentine, Jenna headed towards Rue des Blouses Blanches.
...
Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Lumian roused Franca from her sleep at the crack of dawn and faced her wrathful expression as he recounted the Werewolf incident.
Franca swiftly focused her mind and mumbled contemplatively, "If there's a follow-up investigation, the one you'll face will either be Zombie or Wraith. I'm more inclined to believe the latter."
"Huh?" Lumian was bewildered.
Franca explained matter-of-factly, "They are Sequence 6 and Sequence 5 of the Prisoner pathway."
Lumian sighed, still puzzled, and commented, "You seem to know this pathway quite well."
"Of course." Franca chuckled. "In the whole world, besides a few Prisoner pathway Beyonders, the rest belong to two factions. One is the Southern Continent's terrorist organization, the Rose School of Thought, that I mentioned earlier, and the other is..."
At this point, she paused, teasing Lumian deliberately. After a few seconds, she revealed, "Mr. Fool's Church."

Mr. Fool's Church? Lumian was both surprised and unsurprised by the answer.

He hadn't expected the Church of The Fool to have a large number of Beyonders from the Prisoner pathway, but he figured that, according to the Bible's description, it wasn't too surprising for anyone from any pathway to appear.

Franca smiled and began to explain in detail, "Actually, the Prisoner pathway Beyonders of the Rose School of Thought and the Prisoner pathway Beyonders of the Church of The Fool were originally one."

"They later fractured?" Lumian hazarded a guess.

Franca confirmed tersely. "The Rose School of Thought is an incredibly ancient organization, boasting a history stretching back over two millennia, even predating the Fourth Epoch—prior to the Cataclysm."

Over 2,000 years old... Lumian was astonished.

When he learned that the Iron and Blood Cross Order had been established only 200 to 300 years ago, he had considered it ancient. But compared to the Rose School of Thought, the Iron and Blood Cross Order seemed like a child who hadn't even attended compulsory education.

Franca continued, "The Rose School of Thought was originally an orthodox organization in the Southern Continent. It ruled the Paz Valley and Star Highlands, where the government and the church were one, until the invasion of the Northern Continent's countries."

"When the invasion occurred, they lost their country and went underground, becoming clandestine. On the one hand, they resisted the colonists and attempted to expel them from the Southern Continent. On the other hand, they frequently caused terrorist acts in the Northern Continent. Heh heh, this actually had no effect on their resistance to colonization. Instead, it incurred the hatred of the people of various countries. Of course, their primary goal might not be this. Perhaps it's purely for blood sacrifice and certain rituals."

"How did they fracture?" Lumian was more concerned about this question.

Franca leisurely paced two steps in the living room.

"The Rose School of Thought has held different beliefs for ages. Their core principle revolves around the notion that willpower is born from diverse desires, capable of reshaping reality and achieving incredible feats. Yet, there's a divide in how they

approach these desires.
"Some adhere to indulgence, embracing passionate cravings at all times, even resorting to bloody or primitive sacrificial rituals to bolster their willpower. On the other hand, the temperance faction, working from the potions' names, advocates for suppressing desires, keeping them pent up within their hearts, only unleashing them during critical moments to unleash formidable forces.
"Hence, one faction is known for indulgence, while the other is the temperance faction."
Prisoner... Lumian silently echoed the name of Sequence 9 potion and pondered. "I reckon the temperance faction has got it right."
"Any sensible person would think the same. After all, the body is like a cage for the heart, and the world is a cage for the body. Madness must be curbed, and desires must be reined in," Franca sneered. "But there'll always be a few with a few screws loose. After indulgence, all that's left is madness. They'll barely be able to retain their basic faculties."
No wonder the Werewolf reacted that way... It seems he truly belongs to the Rose School of Thought... If the others in their ranks share his mindset, it only confirms their strength. Surviving to this day without wit would demand remarkable strength... Lumian's thoughts carried both mockery and vigilance.
Franca gazed out the window, watching the daylight grow brighter, and spoke, "In the beginning, the indulgence faction and the temperance faction barely tolerated each other. If you ignore me, I won't meddle with you or the people you protect. But later, the indulgence faction started claiming that the Chained God, whom both factions believe in, is actually the embodiment of some evil god."
Some evil god... Giving in to desires... Lumian's brow furrowed as he sought confirmation.
"Mother Tree of Desire?"
"Yes," Franca smiled. "Someone you know, or rather, a deity you know."
No, I don't want to know Her at all... The Rose School of Thought actually believes in the Mother Tree of Desire. The Werewolf's investigation of the Savoie Mob's information seems more complicated than I suspected... Does the Bliss Society have any connection to the Rose School of Thought? Or do they withhold such information? Lumian fell deep into thought.
Franca sighed sincerely and said, "Powers related to desire can be quite useful, but why can't they be used for the right purpose?"
"Blame it on the evil god?" Lumian cautioned his companion. "It's

best if you don't try."
Franca smiled sheepishly and said, "I still know what I can try and what I shouldn't. I understand the dangers posed by evil gods better than you."
"Yes, later on, the indulgence faction launched a surprise attack on the temperance faction and inflicted severe injuries. The remaining members of the temperance faction fled in a sorry state and were hunted down for a long time until they found protection under Mr. Fool."
"I've heard that Saint Sharron from Mr. Fool's Church was once a member of the temperance faction. Likewise for the Angel of the Holy Spirit beside Mr. Fool's throne..."
The indulgence faction is terrifyingly powerful to be able to hunt down the angel-led temperance faction and send them scurrying. There's no doubt they have angels, and not just one... And Mr. Fool's Church can protect the temperance faction... After hearing this, Lumian gained a rough understanding of the Rose School of Thought's history. He grew more confident in the Church of The Fool's strength and associated some of the names from the Bible with significant figures in reality.
Simultaneously, he understood why the Knight of Swords, the other holder of a Minor Arcana card, intended to blow up the Rose School of Thought's weapons warehouse.
"Heh heh, should we stop calling it the Rose School of Thought? Can't we just call it the School of Indulgence?" Lumian taunted.
Franca replied in amusement, "What a lame name! Do you think every secret organization is as uncreative as the Iron and Blood Cross Order?"
As they chatted, they heard Jenna's familiar gait approaching.
Jenna opened the door and was taken aback to find Lumian standing there.
"Something happened to him last night," Franca explained.
"What happened?" Jenna scrutinized Lumian but found no signs of injury.
Franca briefly recounted the Werewolf and Rose School of Thought, leaving out the deep connection that tied her, Lumian, and the Church of The Fool.
The more Jenna listened, the more alarmed she became. She felt that a Sequence 9 was nothing in the world of mysticism.
Her determination to become an Instigator as soon as possible grew stronger.
After the discussion, Franca added, "I'll briefly explain the situation of Zombie and the Wraith so you don't rush forward without knowing anything or sense the abnormality without realizing it.

"Compared to Werewolf, a Zombie's greatest transformation is their steel-like sturdiness. They're unafraid of fire, bullets, or cannonballs. You need to hit the same spot more than five times in a row to break through their defenses. As Zombies, as long as their heads remain intact, they are not in danger.
"They have also mastered decomposition, frost, and death-type spells that can awaken and control ghosts and corpses.
"A Wraith can freely transform into a specter. They no longer have a physical body and are unafraid of physical damage. Their spellcasting abilities are significantly improved. They can even forcefully possess you, taking control of your body and making you kill yourself.
"After entering the Wraith state, they can traverse different mirrors and use them to conceal themselves. Even if you activate your Spirit Vision, it's almost impossible to see them directly.
"If you encounter something similar to a poltergeist, you mustn't be careless. You have to consider the possibility of dealing with a true Wraith."
Lumian listened attentively and pondered before saying, "Are attacks targeting the spirit more effective against Zombies and Wraiths?"
"Yes, I recommend the abilities of the Sun domain," Franca said with a chuckle. "However, I suggest that you run if you can when facing such an enemy. If you can't, seek help quickly."
Lumian never found it embarrassing to ask for help. As he expressed his agreement, he proposed a new idea.
"They're all members of the indulgence faction. Wouldn't it be better to deal with them using an ability to influence desires?"
If that was the case, the mystical item made from Shadow Branch would come in handy.
Lumian had yet to contact Madam Magician. He planned to wait for Mr. K to reward him before deciding which domain's Beyonder characteristic to match the Shadow Branch.
"In theory, yes, but it might have the opposite effect," Franca warned him.
After discussing the Rose School of Thought, Jenna recounted how she had been recruited as an informant and provided information about the Deep Valley Cloister.
Franca genuinely felt happy for her.
"That's right. This way, you'll have a fixed source for resources, but the officials are very strict about key items. You can't rely on them completely."
Lumian hadn't expected Valentine to be in the market district as well. He was concerned about his lack of necessary disguises. The

Mystery Prying Glasses could only be used at critical moments.
After some thought, he said to Jenna, "Showing your devotion to the Eternal Blazing Sun in front of a Purifier will yield unexpected gains."
"You seem very experienced." Jenna's eyes darted around, sensing that Ciel held many secrets.
...
Leaving 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Lumian strolled back to Salle de Bal Brise.
The more he delved into secret organizations, the more he sensed his lack of knowledge about mysticism.
Lumian sipped a glass of absinthe and settled into his office.
Just as he was about to find a more comfortable position, starlight oozed forth, forming a dazzling and dreamy door.
The door swung open, and Madam Magician emerged. Today, she sported a beige shirt, a brownish-yellow dress, and dark brown leather boots.
What's the matter? Lumian rose to his feet.
Madam Magician grinned and replied, "The friend I mentioned earlier, the one who can help you decipher the symbolic elements, has finished his recent work and is on a short vacation. I'll take you to him now."
Lumian responded with unusual excitement, "Alright!"

Chapter 299: Interpretation

Lumian had been eagerly waiting for the dream symbols to be interpreted so that he could get enough clues before meeting with Padre Guillaume Bénet.

Only then could he effectively interrogate his target.

This time, when Madam Magician placed her hand on his shoulder, the usual layers of saturated colors and strange creatures were absent.

Instead, he felt a surge of starlight before finding himself in a distorted and concealed dark tunnel. His spirit and body seemed in chaos, unsure if he was moving forward, retreating, or simultaneously ascending and descending.

The state lasted briefly, but Lumian couldn't grasp the duration accurately, as if time had slipped from his grasp temporarily.

When he returned to his senses, he almost suspected that he was at Salle de Bal Brise just a moment ago, and in the next instant, he had arrived at his destination.

Before him lay a primitive forest, its dense canopy almost blotting out the sky. In an open space surrounded by towering trees stood a brownish-yellow hunter's hut.

"Go in," Madam Magician's voice echoed, though he couldn't see the demigod.

Following her instructions, Lumian stepped forward, treading on tumbling leeches and navigating through the dancing poisonous insects in the air and vegetation. He reached the hunter's hut and pushed open the unlatched wooden door.

Inside, rows of bookshelves lined the walls, and a wooden table stood in the center, seemingly existing in a different world compared to the primitive forest outside.

A figure sat behind the table, dressed in a white shirt and an open black coat, appearing somewhat obscured by a thick fog. Lumian could barely make out the clothes, facial features, and gender of the person, but not his face clearly.

"Have a seat," the figure spoke with a slightly magnetic and ethereal voice.

"Hello," Lumian greeted with a polite bow before taking a seat. "May I know how I should address you?"

The figure pondered for a moment and replied, "Think of me as a poet."

Poet? Lumian didn't fully grasp the significance of the code name, but he still chose to show respect. "Hello, Mr. Poet."

The poet gave a small nod and said, "Magician has already shared the entire dream and related information with me, but I'd still like

to hear you recount it in detail."
Addressing her directly as Magician... *Is he also a member of the Tarot Club?* A holder of a Major Arcana card? Lumian sized up the poet opposite him with a guess.
In the dense fog's outline, he got a clearer impression.
His black hair was longer than usual, giving him an artistic appearance. His eyes were emerald green, not sharp but captivating. He had a slim face and a relaxed posture...
The combination of these elements and the thick fog made the poet seem like he emerged from a dream.
"Alright," Lumian replied.
He recounted Cordu's nightmare, supplemented by the various traces found in the ruins and the vast amount of information he gathered over the past month.
Compared to before, his emotions were still stirred by recalling these matters, but not as intensely. Throughout the entire process, he only took a single deep breath.
As he spoke, Lumian noticed the poet, leaning back in his chair, clasping his hands between his chest and abdomen. The poet's green eyes were much clearer than before.
In the next second, Lumian noticed strange insects crawling in and out of the other party's eye sockets.
The insects switched between translucency and opaqueness, as if carrying rings on their backs.
Such a scene nearly made Lumian forget to continue his recount. It was like facing the headless monster created by Supervisor Olson. He couldn't help but feel shocked.
He composed himself and forced himself to ignore the strange insects wriggling into his eyes, expressing everything he wanted to say.
After his words trailed off, the poet fell silent for a moment before continuing, "It's truly a dream filled with symbolic meaning.
"Let's start with the simplest part—the deceased Warlock in the tomb."
Doesn't it symbolize Aurore becoming Inevitability's Blessed and ultimately dying? Lumian was about to ask this question, but before he could, the poet seemed to sense his thoughts and took the initiative to explain.
"This is a typical dual-structure symbol. In other words, it contains two layers of meaning.
"The first layer is about the Warlock representing the power of Inevitability, or rather, corruption. And it also stands for Termiboros. The coffin is like the concept of 'death.' Both symbolize the sealing of Inevitability's power and its loss of vitality. The tomb

itself represents the seal.
"In the dream, we can see that the Warlock is truly dead and has never left the tomb. This aligns with the sealed state on your body.
"Your sister Aurore got some boon from Inevitability in this incident as well. She's suspected to be one of the leaders, embodying the power of Inevitability to a certain extent. Plus, she's already dead, so the Warlock matter takes on a second symbolic meaning.
"These two layers of symbolism are superimposed through Inevitability's core power, which can easily make interpreters overlook one of them."
So that's how it is... Lumian's heart sank as he gradually became convinced by the poet. From another perspective, he now understood the essence of the Warlock legend.
The poet kept his seated posture, and there were no longer any strange insects crawling in and out of his eye sockets.
"Now that we've unraveled the full symbolism of the deceased Warlock, there's a preliminary answer for the owl and the other you.
"The other you symbolizes both your mutated personality due to corruption and Termiboros's attempt to achieve His goal by influencing your thoughts. If we only had the first symbol, the other you probably wouldn't be able to leave the tomb.
"The fact that the owl can freely enter and exit the deceased Warlock's tomb means that it can bypass the seal to some extent. It also displayed a few characteristics: monitoring your changes, not showing up at critical moments, and guarding the deceased Warlock.
"Based on our interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the deceased Warlock, the owl represents another Blessed of Inevitability, assigned to monitor your condition. Its attitude towards the deceased Warlock is quite ambiguous. It didn't exhibit the protective behavior it should have, nor did it assist during the final ritual with the angel's descent.
"Bypassing the seal suggests it's in the outside world and might be communicating with Termiboros in some way. I'm not entirely sure about that yet. You shouldn't ignore other possibilities."
So, the symbol of the Sufferer turns out to be the owl. I thought it was the other me or Aurore... Lumian heaved a sigh of relief but also felt a sense of disappointment.
During the momentary pause in the poet's speech, he seized the opportunity to pose a question. "The underground altar exists, but what does the Sufferer aura in the dream symbolize?"
"The first layer symbolizes the previous appearance of the power of

Inevitability there, but only on this layer. It's unlikely that the symbolic elements will take the form of the Sufferer aura." The poet took a moment to interpret. "As for the second layer, if the owl—the Blessed of Inevitability—who watches over you is already a Sufferer, it means it doesn't want others to come into contact with the altar of Inevitability. It also symbolizes the power of Inevitability.

"Furthermore, we observed that you suffered the least damage back then. This suggests that the Sufferer isn't willing to kill you. It might even protect you to some extent. This is quite similar to the psychiatric treatment you experienced in Trier's market district."

So, from the beginning, that person was already eying Termiboros? Of course, before his intentions are fully revealed, he will cooperate with Termiboros to do something... Termiboros attempted to influence me several times, but without success. *Could this be the reason?* Lumian couldn't help but sympathize with the Inevitability angel sealed in his chest.

The poet continued, "I suspect there's a third symbolic layer. It represents a true Sufferer in Cordu, a Sufferer who's not at the Beyonder level."

A true Sufferer... Lumian's heart skipped a beat.

He made numerous connections but couldn't find the correct answer.

The poet wasn't entirely certain about this, so he didn't elaborate further. Instead, he focused on interpreting the symbol that Lumian was most concerned about.

"Whether or not the lizard-like elf actually exists, its symbolic importance in the dream is quite evident.

"Firstly, it represents a yearning for the cemetery and a fascination with entering and exiting tombs, but it never truly enters the tomb of the deceased Warlock. This signifies its affiliation with another faction, linked to the power of Inevitability, yet not exactly the same. It appears to be using this connection to seek and attain something related to Inevitability.

Another faction... Lumian recalled the diaphanous "lizard" present during the Tree of Shadow incident.

The poet sat up straighter.

"Secondly, it symbolizes concealed corruption and unconscious alterations.

"In the entire dream, only two individuals had a lizard-like elf crawl out of their mouths. One was your sister Aurore, and the other was the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue. What do you recall about him in reality?"

Lumian pondered for a moment and responded, "He's somewhat

similar to the dream, but not as exaggerated.
"He's a devoted follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun. When he was shunned by Guillaume Bénet, he became fixated on giving sermons and hearing confessions. Later, his behavior became more and more apparent, neglecting all other matters..."
Suddenly, Lumian was startled.
He thought of Aurore, the other person from the dream who had a lizard-like elf emerge from their mouth.
Hadn't she also neglected to ask Hela for help?
Mr. Poet nodded.
"Your sister Aurore should have exhibited similar behavior.
"Thirdly, the faction or deity represented by the lizard-like elf does not want to witness an angel of Inevitability descending. It symbolizes the role of a saboteur."
Seeing Lumian's confusion, the poet continued, "If it hadn't been the person with the lizard-like elf crawling out of their mouth who knocked you out, brought you to the final sacrificial site, and turned you into a vessel, the descent ritual might have succeeded.
"Consider this: during the ritual, if someone else had stood in front of Aurore instead of you, would she have gained a moment of clarity and pushed him off the altar?"

Chapter 300: Another Symbol

Upon hearing Mr. Poet's question, Lumian was caught off guard. A shiver ran up his spine and pierced his brain like an icy dagger.

Whether it was Aurore, who had knocked him out in the dream and led him to the sacrificial grounds, or the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, who had done it in reality, they all had been secretly corrupted by the lizard-like elves—evident from them crawling out of their mouths!

If Lumian hadn't become the vessel, forced onto the altar and stood before Aurore, Termiboros's descent ritual might have succeeded. Aurore wouldn't have pushed the vessel out the altar, ruining the rite, and Lumian's Mr. Fool mark wouldn't have been activated!

This realization left Lumian's mind in chaos.

He never imagined that the lizard-like elf was behind the sabotage of the ritual. They had insidiously corrupted Aurore and the deputy padre, making them blind to important matters and missing their last chance to save themselves!

"W-what does it want? What's its true motive?" Lumian asked, feeling a pang of pain.

The poet's voice, veiled in mist, replied calmly, "I'm just interpreting the symbolic meaning of your dream's elements. I can't fully reconstruct the truth.

"But I can offer some speculation.

"The faction represented by the lizard-like elves aims to use the large-scale sacrifice of the Inevitability believers to summon an angel for some hidden purpose. However, they don't want Termiboros to descend upon this land for real.

"There must be a conflict between them and the entity known as Inevitability."

Lumian nodded, finding it the most logical explanation.

He couldn't help but furrow his brow.

"What hidden motives do they have?"

"That's one of the paths for your subsequent investigation," the poet said with a smile. "Decryption isn't divination or prophecy. You need enough information for deduction. You can't make wild guesses."

Lumian nodded slightly, eager to catch the padre, Guillaume Bénet.

The poet leaned forward, placing his elbows on the wooden table, hands still clasped together.

"I've already deciphered the more crucial symbolic elements. There's only one left.

"Your dream itself holds a strong symbolic meaning."

"The dream itself?" Lumian pondered for a few seconds but

couldn't grasp the specific symbolism.
The poet's voice deepened, no longer abnormally ethereal but more magnetic.
"It symbolizes protection.
"Back then, due to intense emotional upheavals, your mind was on the verge of collapse, and you fell into a deep slumber. If not for the comfort and hope brought about by the dream of reality, perhaps you would have collapsed completely. Driven by your self-destructive tendencies, you would have acted irrationally until your death.
"Moreover, we can confirm that you don't have the ability to produce a dream of reality, nor can you draw investigators into that dream. The sealed Termiboros can't do it either. In other words, the dream of reality is a result of external interference.
"We haven't grasped the specific abilities of the High-Sequence Beyonder of the Inevitability pathway. We can't determine if it was done by the Inevitability Blessed symbolized by the owl or if it was influenced by other factions. Given the previous interpretation and the situation in reality, all of them have sufficient motives.
"In short, besides the entity known as Inevitability, no one else wants to see Termiboros truly descend upon the land."
Lumian instantly recalled the area around the blood-colored mountain peak in Cordu's ruins that induced slumber.
Before he could bring up the subject, the poet added, "Considering that the area that forces others into sleep is around the sacrificial ground and not the house where you sleep, I'm inclined to believe that it's influenced by other factions. Their main purpose is to disrupt the ritual, and pacifying you just comes with it.
"If it was done by the Inevitability Blessed symbolized by the owl, the location of the abnormal area would be completely opposite."
The faction represented by the lizard-like elf did it, or someone else did. *Is there another faction?* The more Lumian understood the situation, the more he realized that the truth of the Cordu disaster was far more complicated than he had expected.
He fell silent, taking a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking.
"What's the significance of the empty baby cradle in the administrator's castle?"
The poet took a few seconds to contemplate and then replied, "It's a rather minor symbol. It represents the child of the Great Mother. Based on the information you provided, it seems that the child might have entered our world secretly during the final sacrificial ritual, aided by another blood-related son hidden by Madame Pualis. It then left Cordu unnoticed, leaving behind the empty

cradle."
The spawn of the Great Mother... Lumian hissed to himself, realizing the seriousness of the situation was on par with Termiboros's descent.
Inevitability's faction had taken a significant risk and worked tirelessly for nearly a year, all for the sake of obtaining a sealed angel. Ultimately, it served the Great Mother's purpose.
With those thoughts, Lumian let go of his worries.
The saints and angels of the Tarot Club and the Church of The Fool would undoubtedly handle this matter. It was beyond the concerns of someone like him, a mere Sequence 7.
Besides, this issue primarily revolved around the sacrificial ritual and had little to do with the truth behind the Cordu disaster. Lumian's main focus was tracking down and capturing the padre, Guillaume Bénet.
He then inquired, "Why was the entire Cordu village destroyed, while only my home remained intact?"
The poet pondered for a moment and answered, "I believe it symbolizes Aurore's nostalgia, reluctance, and regret.
"After the ritual, she should have regained some clarity. In the midst of the fusion of the villagers' flesh and blood, she instinctively protected the building that represented her beautiful past life.
"Of course, it's possible she also leveraged other forces interfering with the ritual."
Nostalgia... Reluctance... The beautiful life of the past... Lumian fell silent, lost in thought.
Observing this, the poet unclasped his hands and said, "I've deciphered all the symbolic elements of your dream."
"Thank you, Mr. Poet." Lumian stood up and, following the Church of The Fool's customs, pressed his hand to his chest and bowed slightly.
For a moment, his mind turned adrift, seeing the poet, the wooden table, the surrounding bookshelves, walls, the primitive forest outside, and all kinds of insects fade away like a dream, returning to deep darkness.
In an instant, the darkness vanished, and Lumian found himself standing at the edge of a marketplace.
In the distance, there were white buildings with dark black or earthy yellow bell towers and spires. Nearby, cloud-like tents and herds of cows, sheep, and horses were scattered around.
Most of the people passing through the market had dark skin, as if they were exposed to the sun every day. Among them, men wore felt hats and dark-red or sky-blue robes, while women wore

colorful multi-layered gowns.
A chilling wind howled as Lumian gazed at the snow-covered mountain peak in the distance, momentarily lost in his thoughts.
His conversation with the poet and what he had just experienced felt like a vivid dream.
No, it was a dream!
That's why he couldn't see Mr. Poet clearly.
I didn't realize I was dreaming at all. *When did the dream start?* It felt eerily similar to the dream I had in the ruins of Cordu. Could it be that Mr. Poet's divine path has the power to make others have vivid dreams? And could the abnormal area around the blood-colored mountain be related to similar abilities? Lumian was shocked at first, but then numerous thoughts rushed through his mind.
Just then, Madam Magician appeared before him, wearing a beige shirt, a brownish-yellow dress, and dark brown leather boots.
"Do you want to go back to Salle de Bal Brise now?" the Major Arcana card holder asked.
Lumian casually asked, "Where are we?"
Madam Magician gazed at the azure sky and pure white clouds and replied, "We're in Star Highlands' Rapus, once a significant city in the Highlands Kingdom, also known as the City of White."
Star Highlands... Lumian recalled the Rose School of Thought and recounted the Werewolf attack and Gardner Martin's arrangements to Madam Magician. Finally, he asked, "Did the Rose School of Thought enter the market district because of the Tree of Shadow? And didn't they gather detailed information about me from the Bliss Society?"
Madam Magician chuckled.
"You should have asked these questions earlier. The gentleman who helped you decipher the dream symbols is an expert at dealing with the Rose School of Thought. Alright, I'll ask him for you now."
With that, she vanished in front of Lumian. A few minutes later, she reappeared in the same position, unnoticed by the people passing through the market.
Madam Magician smiled at Lumian and said, "Based on that gentleman's experience, although the Mother Tree of Desire and its worshiping organizations show clear purpose, sufficient decisiveness, accurate foresight of the future, and excellent planning on a higher level and at the macro scale, when it comes to specific events, they often appear chaotic, disorderly, and even mad. It reflects the nature of the evil god itself.
"In simpler terms, the organizations worshiping the Mother Tree

of Desire don't cooperate or communicate well. They sometimes act erratically and unpredictably. It's a common situation.
"However, in the past year or two, that gentleman noticed some rudimentary cooperation among these organizations. Some members of the Devil families are even involved."
"Devil families?" Lumian had never heard of such a term.
Madam Magician casually explained, "The families that control the Devil pathway—the Criminal pathway. Some of them show signs of worshiping the Mother Tree of Desire."

Criminal pathway... Lumian began to recall the contents of Aurore's grimoires.

Sequence 9 Criminal possessed a formidable physique, sharp senses, and a range of criminal skills. They were adept at wielding various weapons and could even kill their targets using something as mundane as a spoon.

Sequence 8 Coldblooded were heartless and inhuman. Their bodies were further strengthened, and they gained mastery over spell-like abilities with a leaning towards the eviler domains. Different Coldblooded excelled in different aspects, making them challenging opponents to deal with with no one-size-fits-all solution.

Sequence 7 Serial Killer was well-versed in devilish knowledge and rituals. They could summon projections of devils from the Abyss and had a sick fascination with creating serial murders.

Turning to Madam Magician with a thoughtful expression, Lumian inquired, "What are the names of Sequence 6 and Sequence 5 on the Criminal pathway?"

"Sequence 6 is called Devil, and Sequence 5 is Desire Apostle," Madam Magician readily shared her knowledge.

From worshiping the devil to becoming one—a fitting name for the Devil pathway. And Desire Apostle sounds like a Beyonder who would follow the Mother Tree of Desire. It's a compatible match. They might as well rename it to Mother Tree of Desire Apostle... Lumian couldn't help but criticize as he analyzed the information.

Madam Magician continued, "The first major qualitative transformation of the Criminal pathway is at Sequence 6 Devil. After the corresponding Beyonder temporarily transforms into a devil, not only will their strength, speed, and defense improve, but they become immune to most poisons and acquire a certain resistance to curses and flames.

"More importantly, they possess Malicious Perception. If someone can cause fatal damage to them in a short period of time and begin to take steps to make it a reality, and both parties are within the range of their abilities, the Devil Beyonder can sense the source of danger and the perpetrator. This allows them to take targeted revenge in a counterstrike."

So powerful... Lumian couldn't help but frown.

If the Rose School of Thought's subsequent operations had members of the Devil families involved, the situation would become exponentially more dangerous.

Of course, the Prisoner pathway's Zombie and Wraiths were also

terrifying.
Most importantly, at a certain Sequence, Beyonders of these two pathways boasted formidable defenses against flames.
Dammit, Pyromaniacs would be in for a rough time! Lumian made a self-deprecating comment, infected by Franca's and Jenna's vulgarities.
After pondering for a moment, Lumian inquired, "How short can the period of time be for the Malicious Perception to be effective?"
Madam Magician smiled and replied, "The Devil pathway is highly individualistic. Devils from various races each possess their distinct abilities. Even among devils originating from the same race, differences arise due to their individual nature. The reason behind this lies in the requirement of ostentatious malice, which varies from person to creature.
"Unique wills, distinct hearts, and a penchant for desires all amalgamate to form the diverse nature of devils.
"Now, to your query. Some Devils can sense malice merely minutes before its occurrence, whereas others can foretell it hours or even more in advance. As they progress in Sequence, this ability only grows stronger.
"The range of this ability's influence can span a few kilometers, an entire market district, or perhaps even encompass the whole of Trier.
"Furthermore, Devils wield an array of spells involving flames, poison, and filth."
The more Lumian listened, the more serious he grew. Devils were truly powerful—just like Zombies countering Pyromaniacs, who were experts in fire spells and close combat.
After briefly explaining the Desire Apostle's abilities, Madam Magician comforted him with a smile,
"Don't worry too much. Even if the Rose School of Thought takes action in the future, their target will most likely be Gardner Martin. You'll just be along for the ride. The Iron and Blood Cross Order, being a secret organization, has enough strength to resist the Rose School of Thought even if the Devil families send someone to participate.
"If the Bliss Society and the Rose School of Thought share intelligence, you may become their primary target, but they won't launch a fatal attack on you paradoxically. They fear releasing an Inevitability angel like Termiboros. As long as you pay more attention to abnormalities and suspected conspiracies around you, you'll have enough time and opportunity to seek help."
Upon hearing this, Lumian retorted, "If the Rose School of Thought sends an angel to capture me, how will I have time to seek help?"

Madam Magician chuckled.
"Do you think Trier is a public washroom where an angel can descend and snatch someone away easily?
"If it weren't for the alternate space of the Tree of Shadow with the Paramita World enveloping it, that brainless Abomination wouldn't have been able to descend its power.
"So, remember to avoid such places and live under the sun in Trier."
Lumian heaved a sigh of relief and asked in confusion, "Abomination?"
Could it be the power summoned by Susanna Mattise?
Madam Magician's expression turned odd.
"Yes, Abomination—the child of the Chained God whom the Mother Tree of Desire worshipers and the Rose School of Thought originally worshiped. He's a Sequence 1 angel and the current leader of the Rose School of Thought.
"I won't tell you His real name. This guy is covered in curses. If you say His real name often, you might become a frog that needs a prince's kiss to recover. Or worse."
"Why a prince?" Lumian had read the Intis Fairy Tales Collection published two years ago and remembered that the protagonist of the story was a princess.
"Why else would it be called a curse?" Madam Magician wore a matter-of-fact expression.
Lumian was speechless. He asked, "The spawn of the Mother Tree of Desire are angels, already roaming our world. And to descend, the child of the Great Mother requires a ritual. Is one more special than the other?"
"They're equally special," said Madam Magician, her expression taking an odd turn once more. "The crux of the matter is that it wasn't the Mother Tree of Desire who gave birth to the Abomination, but a high-ranking existence in our world known as the Chained God."
Lumian's heart filled with trauma as he immediately thought of Louis Lund, Administrator Béost, and his valets.
"Can the Mother Tree of Desire impregnate creatures of all races and genders through the barrier?" Lumian asked with a hint of fear in his voice.
Madam Magician shook her head.
"She doesn't have authority in that regard. That belongs to the Great Mother.
"However, if you're enticed by Her and end up interacting with the power She has descended or the aura that seeped into our world, She has plenty of ways to impregnate you. Furthermore, the

Chained God pathway—the Prisoner pathway—is rather special and has a close connection to the Mother Tree of Desire.
"If it weren't for Mr. Fool's protection, the temperance faction members would have more or less been influenced by Her in the past year or two."
Lumian nodded, then brought up the issue of the indulgence faction and the temperance faction.
"I believe the temperance faction's philosophy is correct, but why can the indulgence faction still grow and possess such strength? Is it because there's no fear of losing control when they are already crazy?"
Madam Magician chuckled and responded, "The temperance faction's philosophy is correct, but it doesn't mean that the indulgence faction's viewpoint is necessarily erroneous.
"You have to remember that acting based on the potion's name is like tarot cards. There's a difference between the upright and reversed position. And even if we act in the upright manner, the acting principles summarized by different people will vary according to their unique minds and experiences. After all, we're just acting. Our goal is to deceive the mental imprint left behind by that entity and digest the potion bit by bit. It would be troublesome if we were to completely align with Him."
Lumian nodded in understanding.
"So, the phrase 'remember that you're only acting' not only prevents us from losing ourselves to avoid mental problems but also helps avoid such problems altogether?"
"That's right," Madam Magician affirmed.
Lumian then steered the conversation back to matters pertaining to the Mother Tree of Desire.
"Mr. Poet mentioned that there are multiple organizations that worship the Mother Tree of Desire?"
"Poet..." Madam Magician's lips curled up slightly. "They're all relatively small organizations that haven't formed a large cult. They're far inferior to the Rose School of Thought and the few Devil families, but they're relatively hidden. Currently, we are aware of three. One is the Bliss Society, the other is the Naturism Sect, and the third is the Tree Worship Sect."
After pondering the matter for a while, Lumian finally brought up the idea of crafting a mystical item using the Shadow Branch.
"Madam, once I receive the reward from Mr. K, I'd like your help in finding a saint-level Artisan to craft the item. Do you happen to know the price?" Lumian inquired.
Madam Magician grinned and replied, "I haven't rewarded you yet for successfully joining the Iron and Blood Cross Order. How about

using that reward to cover the cost?"
"That sounds perfect," Lumian happily agreed.
Receiving three rewards for a mission was truly a remarkable thing.
Madam Magician nodded thoughtfully and said, "A friend's relative knows a demigod-level Artisan. I'll check with them first. If it doesn't work out, I'll find another option."
She then smiled and asked, "With the gap between the Lucky One and the potential reward from Mr. K, are you sure you want to use one of them to create a mystical item?"
Lumian responded with certainty, "I won't have any regrets."
His approach had always been to utilize available resources as swiftly as possible.
It had to be known that the padre was already a Sequence 5 bestowed when he left Cordu. He might have even taken a potion to boost his abilities. Dealing with him on one's own was akin to embracing death for Lumian.
He needed to make use of every available resource to enhance his skills quickly and gather more allies to increase his chances of success!
During his early days as a wanderer, Lumian once stumbled upon a wild apple tree laden with fruit. He intended to wait for the apples to grow larger and less sour before figuring out how to pluck them. However, to his surprise a few days layer, someone else had managed to harvest all the small and sour apples.
This incident left a profound mark on Lumian, significantly influencing his approach to handling things.

Chapter 302: Mummy Ashes

Madam Magician didn't say more and asked again, "Do you want to return to Salle de Bal Brise now, or stay here until noon?"

Lumian had never left Intis, let alone come to the Southern Continent. Since he had nothing planned, he nodded and replied, "I'd like to explore around a bit."

Madam Magician gave a slight nod and vanished before him.

Almost instantly, a bone-chilling wind swept through the crowd and struck Lumian.

Having come from Trier in the summer, he couldn't help but shiver in the harsh highlander winter.

Accompanied by the cold breeze, the distant clamor of the market, a few hundred meters away, filled Lumian's ears, making him feel truly immersed in this world.

Recalling how Madam Magician's arrival and disappearance had gone unnoticed by the surrounding people, Lumian quickly made a guess.

Did she create a wall of spirituality or pull me into a separate alternate space?

As these thoughts raced through Lumian's mind, he noticed that the passersby looked at him with wariness and puzzlement. He was only wearing a thin shirt, a black vest, and thin pants, which were hardly suitable for the harsh winter.

"What are you staring at? Haven't you seen someone acting cool?" Lumian muttered. Relying on Alms Monk's endurance, he nonchalantly ventured into the market.

The smell of fresh livestock dung, the sweet aroma of corn, and the tantalizing scent of roasted meat with spices filled his nostrils.

Lumian surveyed the area and spotted numerous stalls selling various food items made primarily from corn. There were boiled whole corn, roasted corn with red sauce, corn chunks served in thick soup, roasted corn wrapped in beef and mutton, onions, and potatoes, corn ground into a gooey paste and stuffed into various meat chunks, and corn spread into rough flatbread sprinkled with ingredients...

After a moment of consideration, Lumian made his way through the "cleared" path among the marketers and arrived at a stall.

The stall owner was a man in his thirties with dark and flushed skin, gaunt face, high cheekbones, and dark brown eyes. He had long greasy black hair and wore a black felt hat along with a dark red robe made of wool and other materials.

Lumian pointed at the bubbling yellow corn paste in the iron-colored pot and asked in Intisian, "How much?"

He had noticed that some folks here understood Intisian. The transactions were done using various metal currencies, including verl d'or.
The stall owner seemed scared, and he replied in non-fluent Intisian with a hint of flattery, "5 coppet for 1 cup."
A lick, pretty cheap... Lumian glanced at the corn paste with mutton chunks and pulled out a brass coin with a Hornacis mountain range pattern on the front.
The vendor breathed with relief and quickly produced a paper cup that didn't quite match the market's style and technology. He filled it up generously, even adding a few extra meat chunks.
As Lumian received the cup, warmth spread through his body.
It was a wonderful experience to have something warm while enduring the biting wind.
The even better experience was the warm corn paste flowing from his mouth into his esophagus and into his stomach, spreading warmth to every nook and cranny of his body.
The corn paste, with its light sweetness and a hint of spiciness and pungency, perfectly complemented the beef and mutton cubes, neutralizing their gamey smell. It was peculiar and appetizing, a treat for his taste buds.
Ignoring the cautious glances from the women and the fear and loathing from the man driving the cows and sheep, Lumian sipped his corn paste and made his way to the end of the market.
Soon, he entered the City of White, Rapus. He spotted the golden Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and the God of Steam and Machinery cathedral adorned with various industrial components. The white buildings, shops selling leather and fabrics, the Highland Import and Export Corporation, and the Rapus Mining Federation signs were all visible. Carriages pulled by long-haired cows and medium-sized horses filled the streets, accompanied by locals in robes and a few foreigners in formal attire.
Lumian picked a shop called Highland Mystic Potion and entered like a tourist.
The owner, an Intisian in his forties, with typical black hair and blue eyes, wore a white shirt with floral patterns, thick cashmere clothes, and a dark blue coat with golden trim.
Upon seeing Lumian, he greeted him warmly, "Good morning, dear compatriot."
The man checked out Lumian's attire and asked with concern, "Did you encounter a bandit?"
"I just arrived in Rapus. There was an accident on the way," Lumian replied, smiling with a Trier accent.
The proprietor of the mystic potion nodded in understanding.

"The Southern Continent isn't all it's cracked up to be, but it's a paradise for adventurers. I arrived in West Balam fifteen years ago in search of opportunities. Life only turned for the better when I found true opportunities in the City of White. By steam!"
With a sigh, he drew a triangular Sacred Emblem on his chest.
"By steam!" Lumian responded with the same etiquette.
The owner's smile grew warmer.
"Brother, would you like some mummy powder? Real mummy powder!"
Lumian looked around the small shop and smiled.
"Why don't you display the mummy in the window to prove its authenticity?"
The boss smiled sheepishly and said, "That would upset the barbarians.
"Some buy mummy powder, but most can't accept mummies as commodities."
Lumian deliberately said, "When I left Trier, there was a shortage of mummy powder. The price skyrocketed. Ever thought of transporting mummies back to Trier for sale?"
"Maritime trade is too risky, and the import-export companies give terrible prices, not to mention the taxes they charge. Those damned hyenas!" The owner glanced at Lumian, testing the waters, "If you're willing to take the risks, we can cooperate."
"How many mummies can you provide?" Lumian feigned skepticism.
The boss smiled.
"That depends on how many you want. I have the right connections."
I can have as many as I want? Have you unearthed the grave of a nobleman from the Highlands Kingdom? Or will you find a corpse or even a living person to make one on the spot? Lumian engaged in a conversation with the owner of the Highland Mystic Potion and left the shop, pretending he needed time to consider the offer.
After wandering for some time, Lumian came across a magnificent three-story white building by the roadside, bustling with locals swarming in.
Curiosity got the better of him, and he followed the crowd inside, only to find Intis soldiers, clad in their distinctive black triangular hats and blue coats with gold threads, guarding the entrance in their white pants and black leather boots.
Rapus, Lumian thought to himself, is truly an Intis colonial city. His gaze settled on the golden words above the main entrance, which read: "Rapus Specialized Court."
Taking a seat in an empty corner of the courtroom, Lumian tuned

in to the trial that was underway.
Two Intis soldiers stood accused of a heinous crime—intercepting a newlywed couple in the suburbs, murdering the husband, and subjecting the wife to unspeakable horrors.
The latter was fortunate enough to survive. With numerous witnesses and ample evidence, the entire case appeared quite clear-cut.
After much deliberation, the judge, who was now holding the third hearing, finally pronounced them guilty, decreeing their immediate expulsion from the highlands. Upon their return to Intis, they would face further punishment in a military court.
The verdict didn't sit well with the local crowd, and they expressed their dissatisfaction loudly. However, the judge remained resolute, ordering bailiffs and soldiers to remove the dissenters from the court.
Lumian observed the faces of the agitated and angered locals as they were forced to leave, and only when they had gone did he decide to leave the courtroom as well.
As he strolled past the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral's square, he noticed a group of clergymen in white robes adorned with golden threads.
They were walking towards the cathedral, keeping a safe distance from the crowd, and speaking in hushed tones.
Lumian, relying on his Hunter's ears, strained to catch their words from afar.
Though the distance made it difficult, he managed to make out two phrases: "Evernight's power... has invaded this place..."
What could that mean? Is the Evernight Goddess Church of the Loen Kingdom extending its reach into the Star Highlands? Lumian pondered for a moment before continuing on his way.
...
At 12:30 p.m. Trier time, Madam Magician escorted Lumian back to Salle de Bal Brise, and he reappeared in his bedroom.
He sat down at his wooden table and began organizing Mr. Poet's interpretation of the dream's symbolic elements.
In the midst of his work, Lumian heard familiar footsteps approaching and an impolite knock on the door.
Putting down the fountain pen, Lumian stood up and glanced at the entrance.
"Come in."
It was Franca, dressed in her usual attire of blouse, beige breeches, and red boots. However, she now wore a light-colored pleated dress around her waist.
"Very strange," Lumian remarked honestly.

Franca sighed, a mix of joy and melancholy on her face.
"I'm not used to wearing dresses yet. This will have to do for now.
"This is to welcome Pleasure."
"Pleasure?" Lumian was puzzled by the term she mentioned.
Franca closed the door behind her and explained with a complex expression,
"Since you've joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order, my initial mission is considered accomplished. Now, I'll see if I can join and assist with your operation.
"And since the mission is complete, there should be a reward. The next Sequence for a Witch is Demoness of Pleasure.
"Yes, I already have all the main ingredients and most of the supplementary ones, except for real mummy ashes. I came to ask if you could keep an eye out during your mysticism gatherings. Damn it, those mummy ashes sold in shops are all fake!"

Chapter 303: Sparks of "Fire"

Mummy ashes... Lumian's mind immediately went to the Highland Mystic Potion shop in Rapus.

The mummies had their origins in the old Highlands Kingdom, and they had a special ancient Highlander term for it. Emperor Roselle translated it into "mummy."

In simpler terms, the most genuine and ancient mummies could be found in Star Highlands, the largest source of mummy ashes.

Franca grew more and more agitated as she spoke.

"Why do you think men in Trier are so keen on things that enhance their abilities in that area? They even dare to consume mummy ashes! This means that those who genuinely need them can't afford the real deal!"

"Many women in Trier are interested as well, hoping their husbands and lovers can perform better in bed." Lumian had read about it and asked Franca curiously, "Does it really work?"

Franca scoffed.

"I can't see any other effects besides getting sick from using powder made from a specially prepared corpse. Well, its use in mysticism is a different matter.

"Think about it. Trier is now flooded with fake mummy ashes. People are gobbling them up without knowing if they're authentic!

"There are many herbs with similar effects, but once they are labeled as mummy ashes, the price skyrockets. Who wouldn't take advantage of that?

"Don't overestimate the merchants' conscience. I've heard complaints at many mysticism gatherings about people finding dead rats, grinding them into powder, mixing it with herbs, and selling it as mummy ashes.

"When I, um, before I had superpowers and was still struggling, I saw the café owner making fake coffee from chicory. Later, he couldn't even afford that. He gathered coffee dregs, animal bile, and even brick dust and soot as a substitute. Believe me, if you visit the kitchens of certain restaurants and cafés, you'd want to hang the boss from the gallows. Those escargot shells are reused, picked up from the trash, filled with ingredients, and served to new customers"

Franca continued her rant, expressing her frustration with counterfeit and inferior products hindering her Beyonder career.

After she finished speaking, Lumian asked with certainty, "Have you finished digesting your Witch potion?"

Franca's emotions returned to normal as she replied smugly, "That was a long time ago. Have you seen me act as a Witch during this

period of time?"
Lumian changed the subject thoughtfully.
"You seem to despise the Rose School of Thought for their acts of terror in the Northern Continent. You even mock them for hindering the colonization resistance by the Southern Continent natives. I don't quite understand your logic. Shouldn't they resist and take revenge when bullied?"
Franca walked to the window of Lumian's bedroom and gazed at the dock and depot concealed by buildings. Her gaze was unfocused as she said, "They should—if they wish to seek the adrenaline from exacting vengeance, for a moment of exhilaration. But if you want to lead the Southern Continent to expel the colonists, such actions will only have the opposite effect. A philosopher back home once said that no king should send troops out in anger. Resisting colonization is a serious and challenging matter; it's something that shouldn't become a wastebasket for venting one's emotions."
Seeing Lumian's confusion, Franca pointed out the window.
"There are many workers and laborers there. They work hard every day and sleep in bedbug-infested rooms. Are they colonists? Did they benefit from the colonies? True, their jobs may be a result of colonial trade, but will they lose their jobs without the colonies and normal trade? I don't think so. The most likely possibility is that they will still have a job that barely provides sustenance; it's the bosses who lose excessive profits.
"They have their own demands and a desire to change the current society. They often join Trier's citizens in various marches and protests, expressing deep dissatisfaction with the government.
"There are many similar people in Trier. Some of them have various reasons and even sympathize with the Southern Continent colonies.
"A philosopher king back home once said that we must distinguish between our friends and foes when carrying out deeds. The Rose School of Thought's various terrorist acts will only pit those who sympathize with the colonists and those who are also resisting the government against them. It makes them the object of hatred that will be exploited by the rulers to bridge any internal conflicts. It will harm the people of the Southern Continent's resistance against colonization.
"The philosopher king even prohibited his intelligence officers from carrying out assassinations or seeking revenge, let alone causing terrorist incidents."
Franca snapped out of her daze and spoke with enthusiasm, her eyes sparkling, "As long as we can gather more allies, isolate our

enemies, and ignite that tiny spark, it can set a whole wilderness ablaze!"
Who is friend and foe... Finding allies and isolating the enemy... Even a tiny spark can set a whole wilderness ablaze... The words left a profound impact on Lumian. He pondered Franca's words repeatedly, especially her last sentence. It unveiled a new understanding of Pyromaniac, bringing him closer to unveiling his first acting principle.
After a few moments, Lumian nodded solemnly.
"I agree with you now. The Rose School of Thought's acts of terror are extremely foolish, mere decisions made after their minds are filled with desire. Uh, as believers of the Mother Tree of Desire, it's quite expected."
Franca pursed her lips.
"If the Rose School of Thought focused on assassinating colonial generals, members of parliament, and high-ranking government officials, as well as destroying battleships and arsenals, I wouldn't mock them. But their blood sacrifices, indiscriminately killing people, are the actions of lunatics. I don't want to become a sacrifice to these madmen one day."
Lumian remarked, "It's a classic case of turning sympathizers against each other."
Franca disdainfully added, "Not only do these lunatics carry out blood sacrifices in the Northern Continent, but they also do it in the Southern Continent, turning villages into uninhabited lands. The Southern Continent has the Rose School of Thought as another insurmountable obstacle besides the colonists."
Lumian nodded gently and said, "That lady took me to the Star Highlands and during my tour of Star Highlands, I encountered a mummy merchant. Should I request permission to visit again and obtain some real mummy ashes for you?"
That lady... Franca realized something and decided not to press further. After some thought, she said, "No need for that now. Just because Trier has plenty of counterfeit goods doesn't mean there's nothing authentic. Let's try to find the authentic ones first. If not, we'll go to the Southern Continent."
Lumian honestly shared his intentions, "I hope you can advance to Sequence 6 within a week and become a Demoness of Pleasure."
"Huh?" Franca was confused.
Who's the one making the advancement?
Lumian didn't hide anything, responding directly, "It has been prophesied that Guillaume Bénet will appear in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge next week. I want to find him and capture him, and I need the help of more friends. The Boss has already agreed to

help me find him. The stronger you are, the higher our chances of capturing Guillaume Bénet."
Amused, Franca teased, "You're learning on the spot, kid. You really aren't holding back anymore. You made a request without getting my agreement to help."
Lumian smiled, replying, "Isn't that what I'm doing now?"
Franca pondered for a moment before saying, "Wait a few more days. If we still can't find real mummy's ashes, we'll go to the Southern Continent to search for them. Remember, try not to trouble the Major Arcana card holder if possible."
"Right then," Lumian said, sharing a similar view, but he never missed a chance to fleece. Otherwise, it would be best to seek Madam Magician's help in dealing with Guillaume Bénet.
A subordinate who couldn't handle problems on their own, bothering their superior all the time, would eventually be left behind!
Furthermore, the Tarot Club followed a rule of equivalent exchange. What price would one have to pay to enlist the help of a demigod-level Major Arcana card holder?
After chatting for a while, Franca, who was about to leave, glanced at the window and suddenly said, "Although Gardner Martin already knows the situation and has made preparations, you can't be careless. You can't place all your hopes on him. The Rose School of Thought is an ancient secret organization. It must possess various abilities."
Why are you bringing this up all of a sudden? Lumian was taken aback for a moment before responding with tacit understanding, "The Boss is at least a Conspirer. He has probably set countless traps in secret, awaiting the arrival of the Rose School of Thought."
On this topic, the two of them continued their conversation as they left the bedroom and entered the corridor.
Franca lowered her voice and said, "I sensed something amiss with the glass in your window. I suspect a Wraith."
The Rose School of Thought's Wraith? Franca discovered something wrong with her Witch's grasp of mirrors? Lumian's nerves tensed as he nodded slightly, acting as though they were discussing an ordinary topic.
He saw Franca stroll into the café and depart Salle de Bal Brise before stepping out of the corridor. Like always, he settled into his regular seat and savored his aromatic coffee.
An hour went by, and Lumian started to feel a bit more at ease. He thought the Wraith had probably left, so he shifted his focus to Gardner Martin and the potential traps.
The following days were filled with paranoia for Lumian. He

sensed eyes on him from the glass window in his room and the bathroom mirror, but nothing alarming occurred.
Finally, the day of the reward promised by Mr. K arrived.
As Lumian descended the stairs of Auberge du Coq Doré, he encountered an unfamiliar woman.
Dressed in a lake-blue dress, her brown hair flowed naturally, and her brown eyes had a uniquely ethereal quality. Her looks were above average, her cheeks plump, and her demeanor stood out from the ordinary.
As Lumian passed by the front desk, he casually asked Madame Fels, "Is that young lady a new tenant?"
The plump Madame Fels smiled ingratiatingly. "No, she's Miss Safari, staying in Room 309. She went to a small seaside town to be a human model for a painter. She only returned today.
"How enviable. Her job lets her take a vacation by the sea."
That human model? Lumian nodded and left Auberge du Coq Doré, catching a public carriage to Avenue du Boulevard.

Chapter 304: Decency

Avenue du Boulevard, 19 Rue Scheer, basement.

Mr. K's face remained hidden under the massive hood, but Lumian could feel the admiration and recognition in his gaze.

Standing behind a red armchair, Mr. K pointed to a narrow wooden table by the wall.

"Make a choice. These are Grade 2 Sealed Artifacts, as per the standards of various Churches. They have distinct characteristics but come with dangerous negative effects. Nonetheless, there are ways to resolve those issues and utilize them to some extent."

Following the gesture of Mr. K's raised right hand, Lumian spotted three containers on the narrow wooden table.

One was an exquisite wooden box adorned with rubies, emeralds, agates, and other precious items. Another was a rubber injector, and the last one was a wide-mouthed bottle filled with a dreamy green liquid with a golden object at the bottom.

Mr. K approached the table, picked up the wooden box with gems, and opened it.

Inside, there lay a thin and soft leather mask. As Mr. K lifted it to display, an exaggerated face outlined in red, yellow, and white oil paint emerged.

For some reason, Lumian's mood took a plunge at the sight of the face, and his heart filled with sorrow.

"It's called the Clown Mask," Mr. K introduced in a low, raspy voice. "Wearing it enables you to create Paper Figurine Substitutes. You can ignite combustible objects within a 50-meter radius and leap between flames, allowing you to transfer wounds across your body and turn a fatal injury into a minor one. However, each wound can only be transferred once.

"It will also meld with your face, altering your appearance. This aspect is beyond your control, but it grants you strong expression control and sharp premonition for a short duration.

"To store it safely, you'll need a high-value container. Otherwise, it will continuously bring frustration, pain, and sorrow to those around it, gradually driving them insane until they break down. For Beyonders, this often means losing control.

"That's why you can't wear it for more than ten minutes at a time. Additionally, you have to 'watch' a comedic performance once a week; otherwise, it will attempt to replace you when you wear it, truly becoming your 'face.'"

Wound transference... This Sealed Artifact belongs to the Seer pathway. It corresponds to the Sequence of Bureau 8's Miss Leah or higher, Lumian quickly deduced based on his experience.

He felt that the Clown Mask suited him well. With Pyromaniac and Flaming Jump, he could significantly increase his strength.
He was in need of changing his appearance, but the limitation of wearing it for only ten minutes made it similar to the Mystery Prying Glasses, albeit more convenient.
Moreover, Paper Figurine Substitutes and wound transference could effectively boost his survivability, but when it came to dealing with Zombies, Wraiths, Devils, or Desire Apostles, these abilities lacked specificity.
Emotional influences were currently a taboo for Lumian. While his psychological issues had been somewhat healed, the flames of pain couldn't be fully extinguished. They still smoldered deep in his heart. If this emotional breakdown erupted, Termiboros would undoubtedly be grinning from end to end.
As Lumian pondered, Mr. K put the Clown Mask back into its exquisite wooden box and picked up an injector made of rubber hoses, a glass syringe, and a thin needle.
At that moment, a tube of bright red liquid quietly filled the syringe, as if it had just been extracted from a person's body.
Mr. K gently shook the injector and said, "It's called Lifeblood. Once injected into your body, it allows you to control your flesh and blood completely for a short period. You won't need to maintain your human form deliberately, and your vital points will be safe. Moreover, you can envelop a target, corrode their body, and kill them from the inside.
"Simultaneously, you can transform into your own shadow and merge with the surrounding shadows. That way, you can secretly trail the enemy and avoid detection.
"With each injection, you'll become closer to our Lord, closer to the most ancient appearance of humanity's original form. Others and creatures won't endure it well. Their bodies will collapse gradually with each injection, and they won't be able to return to their original state. Their minds will be cloaked by shadows, making them crave flesh and blood, turning them into irrational monsters. However, we need not worry. As long as we devoutly believe in our Lord and remember to pray to Him always, there won't be many issues with our bodies and minds.
"I've injected myself several times before. Am I not normal now?"
Lumian didn't fully buy into it. I don't think you're normal... The flesh corrosion ability seems useful against Zombies...
Furthermore, he wasn't devout when it came to the True Creator. He usually used psychological cues to seal the memories of His honorific name and didn't pray at all.
"If you carry Lifeblood without injecting yourself, it won't affect

you other than making you crave flesh and blood," Mr. K explained. He then picked up a wide-mouthed bottle filled with green liquid
filled with an alcoholic fragrance and retrieved a golden brooch carved into a Scotch Broom from it with his white palm that appeared sickly.
"This one's called Decency.
"Once you wear it, you can acutely detect a target's weaknesses. By symbolically giving them items, you can complete a Bribe, significantly weakening their attack, defense, or control over you for a certain period.
"In addition, you can Distort the target's words, actions, and intentions. You can also Distort certain actions of yourself or others to create an environment that's beneficial to you."
Using Bribe to weaken the target's attack, defense, or control... This ability is very versatile. It can be used against Zombies, Devils, or other Beyonders... If I use Distortion well, I can come up with all kinds of tricks... Lumian's spirits lifted, believing this was what he wanted.
The next step was to see if the negative effects could be endured.
Mr. K continued, "It must be kept in liquor that exceeds 45 proof. Otherwise, it might result in arrest from official Beyonders or other factions at irregular intervals.
"You can't wear it for more than fifteen minutes. In the following hour, you'll become repulsive and disdainful. It's best not to go out. Wait patiently until the negative effects fade."
As a Hunter, how can I not be repulsed and despised? And it's normal for regulars at Ol' Tavern to carry two or three flasks of liquor with them... Sometimes, I can even use it to attract nearby factions to capture this characteristic for "fishing." It's a perfect part of certain traps... Lumian quickly made up his mind and said firmly, "I want Decency."
Now, the question was whether this Sealed Artifact could be matched with the Shadow Branch to create a mystical item with both characteristics.
Mr. K respected Lumian's decision and didn't offer any persuasion.
He tossed the Decency brooch back into the wide-mouthed bottle of liquor, capped it, and handed it to Lumian.
Lumian swiftly caught it and mumbled, What if I'm not skilled enough to catch it and shatter the bottle? We'll exchange looks and then flee before the official Beyonders come after us?
Lumian gripped the bottle of liquor suspected to be absinthe and deliberately said, "I have something to report."
He briefly recounted the Werewolf incident and concluded, "The

Rose School of Thought suffered repeated setbacks, yet they remain arrogant. I heard they also believe in the evil god, the Mother Tree of Desire."
Mr. K's gaze turned cold, and his voice carried an oppressive metallic quality.
"The evil god's believers are indeed becoming more impudent.
"Since some deities can't shoulder such a heavy responsibility, let us share Their burden."
Lumian could sense Mr. K's anger igniting as his Pyromaniac potion was showing signs of digestion.
After bidding farewell to Mr. K, he left the basement and closed his eyes in the corridor.
Through this experiment, combined with the fire in his heart when he advanced to Pyromaniac, Franca's words, the various situations in the market district, and the actions of the people of Rapus and the Southern Continent, he concluded his first Pyromaniac acting principle: "Pyromaniacs not only ignite matter but also the mind and society."
...
In the market district, Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.
Lumian gazed at the enticing green liquor bottle, contemplating the need for sturdy military flasks to prevent it from breaking during a potential fight. Simultaneously, he made the final decision—to utilize the Lucky One Beyonder characteristic and the Shadow Branch to create a mystical item.
He felt that Decency's powers didn't mesh well with the Shadow Branch, and its drawbacks were manageable. On the other hand, Sealed Artifacts offered decent effects and could be used independently.
Without any hesitation, Lumian penned a letter, seeking Madam Magician's aid in locating a demigod-level Artisan.
Afterward, he made his way to the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches, summoned the messenger, and dispatched the Shadow Branch and Lucky One Beyonder characteristic, along with the letter, to the holder of the Major Arcana card.
In no time, Lumian spotted the puppet messenger materializing above the desk, dropping a thick stack of papers with a loud thud.
Bang!
The table groaned under the weight of the hefty object.
Lumian rose to his feet and noticed a response placed on top of the stack.
"No problem. I'll assist you in making contact. The process will take some time, as will the crafting of the item. If you don't mind, I'll add a condition that the final product should be portable."

"Additionally, while observing celestial phenomena, I sensed that you are on the verge of assimilating the Pyromaniac potion and can endure a new Inevitability boon. Here's information about some creatures from the spirit world. You can study it beforehand and explore which contracts you might form to borrow their abilities."

Madam Magician possesses knowledge of astromancy? Her predictions are remarkably accurate... Lumian felt a bit lightheaded as he glanced at the substantial stack of papers.

Having summarized the core principle of his initial Pyromaniac acting, he knew he wasn't far from fully digesting it.

Chapter 305: Test

Lumian took his time with the thick stack of information on spirit world creatures. He stowed them and Aurore's grimoires in an iron cabinet he had acquired earlier.

But now, there were other pressing matters at hand.

Unscrewing the lid of a wide-mouthed bottle, he reached into the green liquor to retrieve the Scotch Broom brooch known as Decency.

His plan was to test the Sealed Artifact's abilities and its negative effects.

Waiting for a real battle wouldn't do; he needed to familiarize himself with it now. Figuring it out on the fly during a fight would be disastrous, leaving him unable to coordinate his Beyonder powers and attacks effectively.

He also wanted to test the extent of the brooch's adverse effects while he was still in good shape. After a battle that had taken a toll on his body and mind, it would be too risky to face those effects hastily.

Understanding the brooch's negative effects in advance would allow Lumian to make better choices when forced to use Decency, minimizing its influence on him.

A Hunter who wasn't familiar with their weapon was bound to fail!

Lumian placed the Scotch Broom brooch on the table before him, focusing his mind to sense its power.

As he did so, a gust of wind blew in from the open window, making his heart race. He quickly stood up, extended his right hand, and shut the window tight.

The moment the window closed, the room fell eerily silent, as if it had been sealed off from the outside world.

Lumian then walked over to the door, gently opening and closing it.

It seemed like the safe house had turned into a secluded sanctuary.

Seating himself again, Lumian exuded an aura that could provoke disgust and hatred in small animals—this was an application of Provocation.

Almost instantly, a rat appeared from nowhere, snarling and attacking him with its claws.

Without much effort, Lumian flicked his index finger and thumb, and a crimson spark shot out, incinerating the rat as it squealed in pain.

The rat desperately tried to escape while suffering the scorching

pain, but the invisible force sealed all exits, leaving it trapped.
It lacked the ability to open a door.
Lumian nodded with satisfaction, using the rat to test the other abilities of the Decency brooch.
The test lasted for about 12 to 13 minutes, but Lumian couldn't be sure without a pocket watch. He decided to proceed with caution and removed the Decency brooch, throwing it into a container of green liquor.
Then, with another small crimson fireball, he ended the rat's life, filling the room with the smell of roasted fat.
After stowing away the container, Lumian left the safe house, ready to test the brooch's repellent effect on others.
The gas street lamps were already lit as he stepped out, and he immediately noticed the glares of pedestrians and vendors around him.
It felt as if they despised him deeply, wanting to attack him with knives, bottles of alcohol, or even an iron pot filled with food.
However, "Lion" Ciel's trademark golden-and-black hair seemed to deter them from acting on their impulses.
Th-this effect is equivalent to a large-scale Provocation... However, it's not within my control... Lumian assessed roughly, realizing that he couldn't fully control it. Under the unfriendly gazes, he walked along the roadside and made his way towards Avenue du Marché.
At that moment, two police officers dressed in black uniforms, their shoulders adorned with silver epaulets, and armed with revolvers strolled by the area.
Catching sight of Lumian, they immediately pointed at him and bellowed, "Halt right there! Routine inspection!"
The effects are truly potent... Lumian didn't waste a breath and swiftly turned on his heels, dashing away.
"Stop!"
The two officers shouted, drawing their revolvers and taking aim at Lumian.
He skillfully evaded a pedestrian's sneaky attempt to trip him, making a sharp turn into an alleyway blocked by a barricade. Without glancing back, he hurried into Underground Trier.
He hadn't brought his carbide lamp, nor did he possess night vision. However, as a Pyromaniac, he could conjure light in any environment.
Crimson fireballs materialized above Lumian's head and on his shoulders, illuminating his path. Easily outpacing the police officers, he made his way toward another Underground Trier entrance near Rue des Blouses Blanches.

As he walked, Lumian abruptly twisted his body, narrowly avoiding a black shadow that lunged from a corner.
It was a snake-like creature with bluish-black scales.
The creature reared up, flicking its bright-red forked tongue in an aggressive stance, challenging Lumian.
It doesn't only arouse disgust and disdain from humans... They need to see or make contact with me to be influenced... Lumian sighed and shook his head, allowing one of the fireballs to shoot out and reduce the venomous snake into three charred pieces, emitting a burnt fragrance.
Having already gauged the strength and reach of the negative effects, he decided not to take any more risks. He found a nearby empty cave, extinguished the fireballs, and sat in the darkness, quietly waiting for the effects to wear off.
After what seemed like an hour, he stood up and conjured three crimson fireballs above his head, left shoulder, and right shoulder to illuminate the tunnel ahead.
In no time, Lumian found himself at an exit near Rue des Blouses Blanches. There, he spotted a figure with a carbide lamp emerging from a nearby tunnel.
With a grin, Lumian raised his right hand in a wave.
"Well, well, look who's wandering in Underground Trier like a rat."
It was Jenna.
As she caught sight of Lumian, her brow furrowed.
"Did you use Provocation on me? Why are you so irritating?"
Lumian replied vaguely, "Something like that."
Jenna couldn't hide her annoyance and blurted, "Dammit! Why did you use Provocation on me?"
Not bad. You didn't come over to beat me up. That means you still treat me as a friend... That's probably how strong the negative effects are when they're about to disappear... He smiled and explained,
"I encountered something that left me tainted with a dreadful aura, but it will soon fade away."
Shifting gears, Lumian examined Jenna, who wore a light-white shirt and a faded yellow dress. Her hair cascaded down her back, and she wore a small Sun Sacred Emblem around her neck.
"What brings you to Underground Trier?"
Jenna, now looking more like a college student in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, pursed her lips and replied, "Meeting the two Purifiers. I wanted to show my devotion to god as you suggested. So I dressed in a way that the Church advocates, even wearing a Sun Talisman. But they guided me to Underground Trier, claiming it was to avoid crowds. Dammit, it's just absurd to go

around here dressed like this!"
As the negative effects of Decency waned, Jenna understood why she reacted strongly and calmly shared her experiences with Lumian.
"Did it work?" Lumian glanced at the brown wooden box in Jenna's right hand but didn't rush to ask what it contained.
Puzzled, Jenna inquired, "Yes, it did. Valentine, the Purifier, became much more receptive to me. Imre also changed, but they seem to be cautious and suspicious of me for some reason."
"Maybe they think you're trying to ingratiate yourself and have ulterior motives," Lumian speculated, attempting to analyze the Purifiers' mindset. He pointed at the wooden box Jenna was carrying with his chin. "Is that their reward for you?"
Jenna couldn't help but smile.
"Exactly. They verified the information about Deep Valley Quarry and acknowledged its importance. As compensation, they gave me two main ingredients and one supplementary ingredient for the Instigator potion. I'll collect the rest myself."
"Franca probably has the rest of the supplementary ingredients." Lumian mused. "The main ingredient for a Sequence 8 potion isn't cheap, it's precious, you know. Is the information about Deep Valley Quarry really that important?"
What did this entail?
Jenna tersely acknowledged his words.
"They didn't elaborate much. The only thing they said was that the Purifiers can't directly enter the quarry due to issues between the Churches. But they'll keep an eye on it to prevent things from escalating."
"They also want me to keep contacting the client to get more information from him. Apparently, part of the main ingredients for the potion is an advance payment," Jenna explained.
Lumian nodded approvingly. "Makes sense."
Jenna sighed. "I'm such a degenerate."
"Why do you say that?" Lumian raised his eyebrows.
Jenna grabbed her hair. "I should have asked for enough money to pay off my debts before even thinking about the ingredients for the Instigator potion."
"When you become an Instigator, that money won't be a problem," Lumian scoffed. "You're not planning to stick around as a local singer forever to repay your debts, are you?"
Jenna fell silent for a moment before admitting, "But I don't want to harm anyone."
"Why not just target villains?" Lumian tried to ignite Jenna's determination.

"Damn it, you're the Instigator, not me, right?" Jenna muttered, adding, "How much should I pay Franca? We got the information together; it's not fair if she doesn't get anything."
Lumian chuckled. "Considering the potion formula she gave you, even with a friend's discount, you should pay her a minimum of 20,000 verl d'or."
"20,000 verl d'or minimum..." Jenna's face showed a hint of pain. "For now, I can only owe her. Do you think I'll accumulate more debt the higher my Sequence? The potion formula and ingredients are so expensive..."
"But your earning potential will increase," Lumian half-instigated, half-comforted.
He extinguished the three fireballs on his body and headed toward the exit of Underground Trier, Jenna's carbide lamp lighting their way.
After a few steps, Jenna asked with curiosity, "Why did you create fireballs above your head and both shoulders? What's the point?"
"Haven't you heard of people carrying three lamps—one above their head, one on their left shoulder, and one on their right shoulder?" Lumian asked.
"No," Jenna shook her head, intrigued, "Is it some mystical knowledge?"
"Nah, just folklore," Lumian smiled. "I thought it looked cool, so I went with it."
Jenna couldn't help but curse, "Dammit! You're so childish!"
As they chatted, they left Underground Trier and entered Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, where Franca gave them a suspicious look.

Chapter 306: Ambivalence

Lumian calmly recounted his encounter with Jenna in the depths of Underground Trier while he was enduring the air of repulsion and disdain.

Franca gave a slightly awkward smile and deftly changed the topic.

"How can you be repulsive and detestable? You didn't lose control."

Franca had encountered Beyonders on the Hunter pathway succumbing to a loss of control numerous times, most of them exuding traits that attracted hostility from those around them. This was the principal reason they were swiftly dealt with.

Lumian briefly explained, "I obtained a Sealed Artifact. Its negative effects manifest an hour after I remove it, causing me to exude repulsion and disdain."

Jenna, curious, interjected, "What happens if you don't take it off?"

Lumian's lips curled as he replied, "Then it turns into an alarm, drawing the attention of nearby official Beyonders who'd like to apprehend me."

"It's quite the attention-seeker," Franca remarked with a playful grin.

"It does have a fondness for 'decency,'" Lumian said, his tone meaningful. Then, he added nonchalantly, "Its abilities lean heavily towards Bribe, with a touch of Distortion."

Given the likelihood of needing to collaborate with Franca in the future to deal with Padre Guillaume Bénet, Lumian took the initiative to divulge the situation regarding the Decency brooch. However, he refrained from delving into intricate details, especially regarding the strength and range of its powers. After all, mystical items were a Beyonder's ace in the hole. Exposing them risked a sense of vulnerability. Just as Franca had shared information about the Ring of Punishment while omitting the brass revolver and other items during their earlier operation.

It was a delicate balance—sharing yet withholding the full truth; building trust while maintaining essential precautions.

Franca didn't press further. She pondered for a moment before saying, "It corresponds to a Sequence 7 Briber and a Sequence 6 Baron of Corruption from the Black Emperor pathway. It seems a Baron of Corruption met his end, melding his Beyonder traits with the objects on him to create the Sealed Artifact. Its abilities aren't fully revealed."

"Black Emperor?" Lumian had never heard of this Sequence, nor had Jenna.

"The deity appellation for the Lawyer pathway," Franca whispered,

excitement in her voice. "Rumor has it that Emperor Roselle achieved Black Emperor status before his demise—a true deity!"
For a brief moment, Lumian and Jenna were rendered speechless. Their expressions mirrored their astonishment.
Franca couldn't accurately fathom Emperor Roselle's standing in their eyes as genuine Intisians.
Had he—no, had He truly ascended to godhood?
"Rumors, mere rumors," Franca hastened to add, lest her dependable image be tarnished in Jenna's eyes.
After a few more exchanges, Jenna opened the wooden box in her right hand, revealing the smaller boxes within.
They contained a small, dark, hive-like heart, a sac exuding dark green liquid, and a slender, smoked tube-like substance.
Franca scrutinized them briefly before giving a nod of approval.
"The heart of the Demon Throat Honeyguide and the poison sac of the Dark Prowler—these are the main ingredients. Yes, the Dark Prowler is a peculiar two-headed snake.
"You've also acquired the Demon Throat Honeyguide's syrinx. You only need blue Jimsonweed juice, fern powder, walnuts, and pure water... I have the blue Jimsonweed juice. The other three supplementary ingredients are easy to come by."
Fern powder... Lumian recalled the supplemental ingredient for the Provoker potion shared a similarity. It implied being "susceptible to others' words."
In that light, Instigator and Provoker bore resemblance. Hunter and Demoness truly were neighboring, interchangeable pathways.
Noticing Jenna's keenness to buy ferns and walnuts from the right shops and prepare pure water overnight, Franca cautioned, "Hold on a moment. Set yourself straight first. You've digested the Assassin potion, and chances of losing control with the Instigator potion are slim these days, but why not aim for the best? Wouldn't it be wiser to minimize the chance of losing control entirely?"
Lumian scratched his chin and added, "I'm curious what kind of monster an Instigator would end up as after losing control."
Jenna shot him a glare and settled onto the sofa, shutting her eyes and focusing on her breath.
Lumian sprawled in the armchair next to him, his arms draped over the armrests. He turned to Franca and inquired, "Have you gotten your hands on genuine mummy ashes?"
"Nope," Franca shook her head, a touch of helplessness in her expression. "I even offered 500 verl d'or for 10 grams, but those guys keep pushing fakes. Worthless bunch. They can't even tell the real from the fake!"
"Only 500 verl d'or?" Lumian teased. "Aren't you rolling in it?"

"Normally, 10 grams go for just over 100 verl d'or. 500 is already a small fortune, alright?" Franca snapped back, her frustration evident. "And I'm not exactly swimming in money at the moment."
Lumian nodded, getting why Franca's funds were running dry.
Her infiltration of the Iron and Blood Cross Order wasn't a true success. It could only be considered as aiding Lumian in reaching the goal. So, the reward she received wasn't the main ingredients for the Demoness of Pleasure, but rather the privilege to buy them at a discount.
"How much more do you need?" Jenna's eyes popped open, a willingness to help evident in her gaze.
Franca shook her head and replied, "If 500 verl d'or can't get me the real stuff, neither will a grand. They'll just think I'm a fool, waiting for me to bid higher."
She then turned her gaze to Lumian.
"What's your plan for now?"
Given time, she could likely snag actual mummy ashes in a fortnight or a month. However, Lumian needed her assistance within the next week, pushing her to consider searching for true mummies in the Star Highlands of the Southern Continent.
Lumian caught onto Franca's unspoken message and mused, "Maybe consider a little arson and digesting the potion to some extent."
This way, he could unlock the Contractee boon, garnering diverse abilities from different creatures through contracts.
As far as he knew, a freshly minted Contractee could only forge three contracts. Lumian intended to cherry-pick three from the four possible abilities: ones that impacted the Spirit Body or psyche, basic teleportation skills, a moderate level of disguise, and an ability akin to invisibility or shadow blending.
The final choice hinged on the information on creatures from the spirit realm. Maybe the willing creatures suitable for a contract with Lumian didn't wield matching skills.
Lumian was sure of one thing—all spirit world creatures could traverse the spirit realm—a basic form of teleportation. The variance lay in swiftness. If he struck a pact with White Paper, perhaps he'd manage only ten to twenty meters per jump. Not the optimal choice for traversing to the Southern Continent—exhaustion would likely make him lose control long before he arrived there.
"Arson... What's your thinking?" Franca sat cross-legged in the recliner.
Lumian recounted the acting principle he had deduced about the Pyromaniac.

Franca shared her insight based on her own experiences. "Upright acting is incitement, and inverted acting is instigation. They can all help you digest the potion. Wouldn't that be easy? Go down to the docks tomorrow and incite the dockworkers into a strike. The rallying cry will be for better pay."
Lumian shook his head slowly.
"If I can rally them into a strike and there's a good chance it'll get them some benefits or help them achieve their goals, I'll give it a shot. But if it's only going to bring disaster upon them, I'm not so keen on it.
"I can't stand exploiting others without benefiting them and causing harm instead—unless there's no other way. Then anyone can be sacrificed.
"Once there was this guy who always said that we could only grab more and have enough food if we united. But when we did unite to fight others for food, he took advantage of the chaos and made off with the food."
"You've got quite a bit of experience." Franca studied Lumian anew, feeling that he wasn't just as simple as Muggle's brother.
Jenna had been through similar situations.
Franca sighed and said,"As expected, you're quite the instigator in the upright sense. I'd be the same if I were you. Though I can put up a tough front, truth be told... haha, I can't bring myself to do it."
Lumian regarded her thoughtfully and spoke,
"I find you a bit paradoxical. Sometimes you're seasoned, well-informed, and have a knack for analyzing things. Other times, you're foolish, innocent, and naive."
Lumian had only encountered such a contradictory disposition in one other person—his sister Aurore.
Stirred by Lumian's string of words, Franca blurted out, "Are you trying to provoke me? How am I foolish or naive?"
At this, she caught Jenna's disapproving glance.
"Ahem." Franca cleared her throat and went on, "It's because I have this core kindness and certain expectations for the world. Even after seeing how harsh life can be, I still cherish life. Sigh, most in my group are like that. Only a few are resilient, brilliant, and agile. They seem to never be daunted by hardships or moral dilemmas."
The Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society? *Why do they have such similarities?* Lumian nodded, choosing not to probe further.
With Jenna's plan to gather the remaining supplemental ingredients the following day to advance as an Instigator, Lumian swiftly departed from Rue des Blouses Blanches and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré.
As he made his way up the stairs, Lumian caught sight of Anthony

Reid, the information broker, coming down with a suitcase.
"Moving out?" Lumian inquired.
"That's right." Anthony Reid, still donning his military-green camouflage, gave a slight nod.
Lumian chuckled and remarked, "Didn't you mention some unfinished business in the market district?"
"The lead's gone cold." Anthony Reid let out a soft sigh.
Gone cold? Suddenly, Lumian recalled having seen a parliamentary election poster in the other man's room. He prodded, "Because Hugues Artois is dead?"

Chapter 307: Instigation

Upon hearing Lumian's question, Anthony Reid, his round face slightly pudgy and his skin with a slight sheen, fixed his dark brown eyes on him for a moment before responding, "I'm not sure what you're getting at."

The information broker's emotions appeared steady, and his expression seemed unaffected. It was almost as if Hugues Artois's demise hadn't affected him in the least.

Lumian's grin widened, and he didn't press further. Pointing toward the lower level, he suggested, "Let me buy you a drink. You've aided me in the past, and we've fought side by side. Consider it a parting gesture."

Anthony Reid scratched his retreating, light-yellow hairline with his free hand, his other holding a suitcase, pondering briefly before conceding, "Okay."

Descending the narrow, gas-lit staircase, the duo entered the basement bar and settled at the counter.

"What's your poison?" Lumian inquired in a casual tone, as if he'd just stepped into his own abode.

"Fennel absinthe," Anthony Reid replied succinctly.

"Absinthe, eh?" Lumian chuckled, producing a verl d'or silver coin and four coppet copper coins. He tossed them to the barkeep, Pavard Neeson, who sported a ponytail. "Two glasses of Somersault."

Somersault was bar parlance, signifying a double serving of fennel absinthe and a measure of "little mummy."

The latter took seven licks, while the former required twelve.

Pavard Neeson deftly flipped over standard cups and filled them with a dreamy green liquid for Lumian and Anthony Reid.

As Lumian took a sip, he savored the familiar bitterness and revitalization. He observed Pavard Neeson, whose dark brown beard framed his lips, muttering in a low, ingratiating tone,

"Ciel, got any of them peculiar drugs?"

The bar owner and amateur painter believed that Ciel, a notorious mob leader, surely possessed a couple of routes for obtaining proscribed substances.

Lumian caressed the glass with his thumb and smiled, inquiring, "What kind of drug are you after?"

Recognizing that Anthony Reid was an information broker often entangled in illicit affairs, Pavard Neeson did not hold back, explaining in hushed tones,

"Banned psychotropic drugs. Sigh, when that odd tree affected me, I created the draft I was most proud of. Actually, it wasn't just my

most satisfying piece; it embodied the aesthetics I'd always strived for but never reached. It perfectly channeled my thoughts and convictions. Since then, that sensation's eluded me completely. Every stroke of mine has turned into dogsh*t! I'm considering experimenting with psychotropic drugs, hoping to recapture that sensation."

Lumian took another sip of the misty absinthe, his lips curling in a derisive smile,

"If I were you, I'd steer clear of painting altogether. You lack the innate aptitude."

Without waiting for Pavard Neeson's retort, he chuckled and stated, "Relying on drugs for passable creations signifies your dearth of talent!"

"But many famous painters have resorted to it..." Pavard Neeson began, only to be cut off by Lumian. He clicked his tongue and interjected, "That's an indication their creative faculties are waning, their fountain of inspiration drying up.

"Isn't that cheating? Pitting drug-fueled works against those of other artists, barely eking out a victory. Earning a spot in an exhibition and proudly proclaiming to every visitor: 'Behold, I'm despicable. I possess an inferiority complex. Drugs are my prowess, and demons are my parents.'"

Seeing Pavard Neeson's visage turn ashen, Lumian spread his arms slightly, probing, "Does that fill you with pride?

"Should you possess talent, you'd no longer be an amateur painter. Even if critical acclaim eluded you, and the World's Artists Exhibition snubbed you, private galleries would come seeking. You understand the harsh reality better than I do."

At this juncture, Lumian's smile broadened.

"Drugs won't save you. It's available to all, like a common commodity. When everyone resorts to it, won't they be pitted against their innate skill and standards?"

Pavard Neeson's lips quivered, yet he remained speechless.

With a somber expression, he took a couple of steps back, slumping into his seat, as if his spirit had vacated his body.

Anthony Reid, who had been quietly sipping fennel absinthe, turned his gaze to Lumian. "You're not a fan of those forbidden psychiatric drugs?"

"Otherwise?" Lumian scoffed.

Anthony Reid shifted his attention to Pavard Neeson, visibly grappling with his inner turmoil, and spoke contemplatively. "You seem to have swayed him."

"I merely stoked the embers of his guilt," Lumian replied with calm composure.

Anthony Reid nodded gently. "But what if your persuasion falls short?"
Lumian laughed. "I'm not his godfather."
If he couldn't sway him, so be it.
A brief pause fell upon Anthony Reid before he turned his gaze back to Lumian.
"Your method of dissuasion deviates from your usual approach. Is this acting?"
Impressively observant and astute, as expected from a Mid-Sequence Beyonder of the Spectator pathway... If I can kindle the inner fervor within a Spectator's heart, it should greatly aid my digestion... Lumian mused inwardly. Holding his glass of verdant liquid, he looked ahead and replied, "I stumbled upon some fliers earlier. They made mention of Hugues Artois deserting his troops during the war against the Loen Kingdom a few years back, leading to countless casualties."
Anthony Reid remained silent, savoring his fennel absinthe in quietude.
Lumian's gaze flickered toward the vacant bar counter as he continued, "I recall you wrestled with the lingering effects of PTSD from that war a few years ago."
With a gulp, Anthony Reid took a swig of the green liquor.
Lumian opted to not bring up the parliamentary election poster found in the information broker's room. He glanced at the vacant shell that was Pavard Neeson and mumbled to himself, "If the sole motivation is animosity towards Hugues Artois, then news of his assassination would be met with jubilation and him drinking until he dropped at the bar.
"But if one wishes to unravel the reason behind Hugues Artois's actions, understand how he wormed his way into politics and a parliamentary bid despite his past, and uncover the strings being pulled in his favor, one must seek out other breadcrumbs to grant the departed some semblance of peace.
"The official Beyonders should be on this case, but they labor under too many constraints. They lack the untamed boldness of wild Beyonders."
Seated still, Anthony Reid took another swig of fennel absinthe.
Lumian chuckled.
"It's indeed a vexing conundrum. The hurdles are countless, and the perils are real. Surrender becomes a tempting option for everyone. In the end, though, Hugues Artois lies deceased. The instigator of that tragedy rests in the grave. The departed souls should find some solace."
Anthony Reid ceased his imbibing, his middle-aged visage

betraying no emotion.
Lumian glanced his way, lowered his tone, and smiled knowingly.
"Folks plagued by severe mental ills can't ascend far in the Spectator path. And even if they do plateau, external stimuli can trigger catastrophic lapses, transforming them into monstrosities. In this ever-more perilous world, stability is but a distant wish for flawed Beyonders."
At this juncture, Lumian reined in his expression and fixed his gaze upon Anthony Reid's profile. He inquired, his voice resonating with gravitas, "Do you fancy departing laden with remorse and reluctance, languishing in the throes of becoming a monster, shying away from your former comrades, or do you dare venture forth in pursuit of the truth, courting danger, and crafting your own heroic saga?"
Without acknowledging Anthony Reid's response, Lumian gracefully alighted from the barstool, lifted his fennel absinthe, and downed the remainder in a single gulp.
With that, he whispered into Anthony Reid's ear, "I contributed to Hugues Artois's demise. We're still untangling his problem."
Observing Anthony Reid's slight tremor, Lumian straightened up and exited the subterranean bar without casting a backward glance.
He strolled back into Room 207, not bothering to shut the door behind him, and lit the carbide lamp.
With a casual swivel, he spun the chair around and settled into it, his posture easy as he fixated on the dim corridor outside.
Lumian waited in abnormal silence, as he held a certainty that the figure he awaited would materialize.
As moments ticked away, the couple's voices escalated into a quarrel anew, and the rowdy drunkards began to trickle onto the street.
The soft patter of hesitant steps drew near Room 207, each sound echoing the uncertainty.
A sly grin played upon Lumian's lips, and he reclined in the chair, his gaze steady on the door.
Before too long, Anthony Reid stepped into view, garbed in a military-green shirt and matching pants, capped off by tall leather boots. His hair lay cropped and thin.
Standing within the circle of light cast by the carbide lamp, he regarded Lumian seated at the wooden table, a smirk adorning his lips. His features danced in a contorted display.
In a rich timbre, he intoned, "I know you're trying to provoke me. I know you're acting, but... you're correct..."
Anthony Reid, middle-aged and weathered, raised his right hand

and pressed it to his chest, his expression one of fierce resolve.
"Over these past few years, my heart has been seared by anguish and righteous anger."
A knowing smile graced Lumian's face as he shut his eyes momentarily, sensing the Pyromaniac potion digesting a little.
He rose from his seat and addressed Anthony Reid, saying, "Truth wields the mightiest power of persuasion."
Anthony Reid felt a weight lift after speaking, the inner conflict and confusion subsiding.
He ventured into Room 207, the door clicking shut behind him. His eyes swept over the surroundings in a swift assessment.
"Did you truly eliminate Hugues Artois? How deep did your investigation penetrate?"
"Celia Bello, the one who assassinated Hugues Artois, is a friend of mine. It was I who first unearthed the heretic cults supporting Hugues Artois," Lumian responded in a matter-of-fact tone before extending a sincere apology. "My earlier words held a deceit, and for that, I'm sorry."
Anthony Reid was taken aback.
"Which statement?"
A mischievous grin curved Lumian's lips.
"Actually, we haven't even embarked on the trail to uncover the people and forces behind Hugues Artois."

Chapter 308: Incomprehensible Choice

The plump, middle-aged Anthony Reid found himself taken aback. But after a brief moment, he grinned in a self-deprecating way and uttered, "I was so rattled that I couldn't even judge the authenticity of that sentence. As anticipated, a Spectator must take a seat in the audience."

Lumian remained calmly seated, his smile unwavering.

"No, it's not that simple. Why did I leap off the barstool? Why did I murmur into your ear from behind? My aim was to shield you from my subtle expressions and involuntary body language. In those moments, your emotions were already stirred, blurring your ability to decipher my true intent."

A short pause followed Anthony Reid's contemplative silence, then he spoke,

"That's one reason. Another lies in your characteristic demeanor. I don't know if you've caught on, but you tend to put on a bit of a show, appear nonchalant, or in modern terms, act cool.

"Just then, I believed those actions, given the circumstances, were in line with your usual behavior, aimed at lending weight to your words. So, suspicion didn't even cross my mind."

A chuckle escaped Lumian's lips.

"It's only natural for a lad like me to yearn for a touch of coolness, a bit of swagger. It also conveniently masks my true motives. Actually, both are genuine. That's why they remain impervious to scrutiny."

It was akin to him having Fire Ravens circling him with one hand in his pocket, unleashing them on his adversaries as he advanced. First, it was undeniably cool, and second, he seized the chance to grasp Mr. K's finger to avert any potential mishaps.

Anthony Reid pondered momentarily before nodding.

"Only a superficial motive, steeped in authenticity, can truly deceive a Spectator."

Raising his right foot over his left knee, Lumian steered the conversation back on track.

"Our journey to unveil the people and forces behind Hugues Artois hasn't yet commenced, as we are engaged in more pressing matters. But fear not, we shall delve into this matter next week. We possess the relevant sources of information as well."

Lumian's strategy involved Jenna delving deeper into Hugues Artois's background through the Purifiers, exploring ways she could "assist."

As the one responsible for Hugues Artois's demise, it was logical for Jenna to keep tabs on the investigation's progress, hoping to

unearth all details without arousing the official Beyonders' suspicion. These thoughts and tendencies were inherent in Jenna, so Lumian didn't need to fuel them further. Just a reminder would suffice.

In due course, the Purifiers could subtly guide Jenna and her companions toward actions they might find inconvenient. This would undeniably supply Anthony Reid's investigation with invaluable leads.

Anthony Reid's deep brown eyes mirrored Lumian's figure as he absorbed the discourse in silence.

The information broker offered an almost imperceptible nod.

"I'll stay a while longer."

Engaging with Spectators of the Beyonder path is straightforward. There's no need to concoct another tale or search for an excuse to sway him. He can ascertain the truth for himself... Lumian flashed a grin and gestured toward the bed. "Take a seat."

This way, he needn't expose Jenna's true identity or her role as a Purifier informant.

Anthony Reid stood near the door, rooted in place, and spoke, "You've more or less sussed out what's happened to me. Is there something else you want me to add?"

"I'd prefer a more detailed account," Lumian responded without much ceremony.

Having been through the Poison Spur Mob, the Bliss Society, the Cordu catastrophe, Ruhr and Michel's deaths, and the explosion at the Goodville Chemical Factory, Lumian found the evil gods and their minions abnormally repulsive. His casual demeanor had been replaced by a newfound seriousness.

Once, he'd believed that people could fancy whatever beliefs they pleased—that it didn't concern him. Now, his perspective had entirely changed. He held that only heretics who'd gone to their grave were the good ones. The living ones were ticking time bombs of doom, liable to unleash havoc on him and his companions sooner or later.

So, he wasn't just spinning tales for Anthony Reid. He truly planned on delving into Hugues Artois' affairs and uncovering more of those heretics when he could spare a moment.

Moreover, this could endear him to Mr. K and the Aurora Order.

Of course, it did seem quite odd for a wanted mob leader to be lending a hand to the authorities in taking down cultists.

Anthony Reid's expression darkened as he said, "Towards the end of the war with the Loen Kingdom, my comrades and I were stationed at a vital route in the northern foothills of the Hornacis mountain range. Our commanding officer was Major Hugues

Artois.
"We were split into three companies, each at different positions. We were to prevent small Loen Kingdom Beyonder teams from crossing the treacherous path and attacking us from the rear, as well as defend against direct assaults.
"That night, gunshots and cannon fire suddenly shattered my sleep. I watched as my comrades were torn apart, one by one, from behind. Their heads exploding, bodies rent asunder. The earth became a sea of blood..."
At this point, Anthony Reid's breath quickened, as if he was reliving the trauma.
He paused for a moment before continuing, "In the midst of that war, I had a fortuitous encounter that pushed my Sequence upward. I never reported it to Hugues Artois. Using my newfound abilities, I managed to break through the encirclement with four wounded comrades and retreated.
"Two of them were gravely hurt and were left behind on the mountain path for—forever. I can still see their pained and angry gazes.
"At first, I thought maybe one of the other positions had been compromised, or that Loen's airships had dropped troops behind us under cover of darkness. But later, I realized that the reason was that Hugues Artois's company had chosen to retreat without informing us, after encountering only a probing attack!"
Lumian pondered for a moment before replying, "When Hugues Artois ordered the retreat, didn't those soldiers question it? Didn't they try to get word to the other two positions?"
"Hugues Artois was our commanding officer, and he knew how to give rousing speeches. Plus, he had a warrant supposedly signed by General Philip," Anthony Reid said, his expression grim. "The soldiers back then assumed he had already passed on orders to the other positions. I still can't wrap my head around why he'd sacrifice us. It wouldn't have taken much time or caused him any harm."
"Maybe he was overwhelmed and forgot," Lumian suggested, not out to defend the late Hugues Artois, merely offering a possible explanation.
Anthony Reid shook his head.
"He wasn't a green recruit on his first battlefield. He had proven his mettle in prior fights, showed his leadership under duress."
Lumian didn't delve further, allowing Anthony Reid to continue.
"Once we found out the truth, the three of us fought to bring Hugues Artois to military court, but it was futile. They'd simply tell us that imagination wasn't evidence.

"Helpless, we watched Hugues Artois shift into politics after the war and rise through the ranks.
"My other two comrades were frail to start with. They passed away burdened by fury and pain. When Hugues Artois threw his hat in the ring for the Enlightenment Party in the market district's parliamentary election, I ended up here."
Lumian nodded slightly and inquired, "Being an information broker, that's to hide your true identity?"
"No, I've been scraping by as an information broker for a few years now," Anthony Reid replied with a wry smile. "Plus, this cover helps me dig deeper into Hugues Artois' dealings."
"Any breakthroughs?" Lumian asked naturally.
Anthony Reid's expression darkened as he answered, "Hugues Artois' foray into politics seems unremarkable. He rode General Philip's coattails and climbed the ladder. His eloquence caught the eye of several senior Enlightenment Party MPs. And he forged ties with a handful of ex-noble families."
"Is General Philip a concern?" Lumian queried, straightforward as ever.
Anthony Reid sighed slowly, his voice heavy, "The general met his end before I could investigate him. Official word is—illness took him."
Lumian posed a few more questions before saying, "I'll catch up with you when I've got more to share."
"Sure." Anthony Reid understood Lumian's sincerity.
...
After departing Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian made his way back to the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches. He swung open the iron cabinet, retrieving a hefty stack of information concerning the denizens of the spirit world.
Within the assortment, he discovered a notebook labeled 'Sights in the Spirit World.' Flipping through a couple of pages, he could feel a surge of frustration and anxiety creeping into his mind.
His immediate aim wasn't to grasp the intricacies of the spirit world, but rather to pinpoint suitable creatures from that realm. Thus, he closed the notebook and delved into the introductions of the various spirit world entities.
Somewhat inexplicably, after poring over the pages for over half an hour, Lumian sensed his mental energy draining away. His thoughts seemed to evaporate, forcing him to bring his study session to an abrupt close. He sprawled out on the bed, drifting into slumber.
Early the next morning, Lumian arrived at Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, and rang the doorbell.

Franca had already risen from her sleep, attired in her customary shirt and breeches. She directed her gaze towards Lumian and inquired, "What brings you here so early?"
Lumian's eyes flicked towards Jenna, who occupied the living room, a smile tugging at his lips.
"Isn't today the day Jenna advances to being an Instigator? I'm here to witness the moment."
A frown played across Franca's features as she muttered, "You seem quite concerned about her."
"Absolutely," Lumian affirmed, his grin widening. "Once she's an Instigator, she can aid me in dealing with Guillaume Bénet. While I can't exactly count on her for a direct confrontation, she'll excel at launching sneak attacks and surveying the surroundings to forestall any potential mishaps."
Jenna emitted a derisive snort, while Franca offered a mix of exasperation and amusement through a tongue click. "Your words are like honey."
"The kind that's already been digested?" Lumian chuckled, his self-awareness evident.

Chapter 309: Restoring Confidence

Naturally, Franca caught onto Lumian's true intentions; otherwise, her Instigator potion would've been a wasted effort. She felt satisfied that Lumian was one who wouldn't falter in a battle of sophistry, and she hoped he could maintain that.

"Come on in." Franca gestured for Lumian to step into the living room.

Right then, boxes already occupied the coffee table, containing Demon Throat Honeyguide and other ingredients.

Simply glancing at these items stirred something in Lumian, an urge to devour them.

Thankfully, it wasn't overwhelming. It was more like hungry folks eying a chef grilling lamb.

Jenna's focus had returned to the ingredients. Gazing at the white porcelain broth bowl with its dual handles and cover, she found it absurd that she was going to consume it the same way she had consumed the Assassin potion.

How was this potion concoction? It seemed more like cocktail mixing or broth preparation!

Mysticism was nowhere to be found!

Jenna inhaled deeply, then poured 100 milliliters of pure water into the broth bowl using a measuring cylinder. She added the Demon Throat Honeyguide and the Dark Prowler poison sac.

Amidst the bubbling sounds, the two main ingredients fused in the pure water.

A manifestation of the law of Beyonder characteristics convergence... Lumian observed closely, holding his words.

Franca carefully unsheathed a ritual dagger and conjured a wall of spirituality around the living room.

The hive-like heart and the dark-green poison sac began to dissolve simultaneously, coloring the pure water in the white porcelain bowl with a gleaming black hue.

Jenna then added the syrinx of the Demon Throat Honeyguide, five drops of blue Jimsonweed juice, and 10 grams of fern powder. Finally, she tossed in an unpeeled walnut.

Watching the walnut disappear as if swallowed by crimson molten steel, Jenna couldn't help but feel a shiver of fear.

Can this thing really be drunk?

"Not bad. It's exactly like the Instigator potion I brewed before," Franca commended with an easy smile.

Of course it's the same. Concocting a potion is that simple... Lumian thought to himself.

Franca waved her hand, her confidence unwavering, and

continued, "No need to fret. Downing a Sequence 8 potion directly won't trouble you. Plus, you've already digested the Assassin potion."
Infected by her confidence, Jenna's expression gradually turned resolute.
Oh, you're employing Instigation, are you? *Is this an upright approach for an Instigator?* Lumian grasped Franca's intentions, yet he didn't call her out.
Jenna steeled herself and composed her mind. She picked up the double-handled broth bowl and lifted it to her lips.
Gazing at the obsidian potion fizzing with tiny bubbles, as though harboring hidden desires and ill intent, she tilted her head back and poured the contents from the porcelain bowl into her mouth.
An acute pain coursed from her mouth down to her esophagus, radiating to her brain and other parts of her body.
The pain jolted her awake, memories of the explosion at Goodville Chemical Factory flashing through her mind. She gained fresh insights, a better understanding of the true intentions and thoughts of those involved. She sensed malevolent thoughts that had either come to fruition or were waiting to be acted upon.
Soon, Jenna's heart was filled with rage, loathing, and a desire to obliterate those individuals and matters. She felt an urge to cease holding back and unleash her emotions.
Recalling Franca's repeated warnings, she resisted letting her hatred, anger, and desires take the reins. She clenched her fists, standing still.
Her shadow seemed to deepen, and her brownish-yellow hair appeared to lengthen.
In a little over ten seconds, the pain gradually receded, and Jenna reconnected with her body.
It's indeed quite easy... Most of the reason why I'm feeling half-dead after gulping down potions at a low Sequence is due to Inevitability's corruption... Lumian sighed.
Jenna swiftly gathered her thoughts and stretched her limbs, examining the changes in her body.
"Oh, my body's definitely gotten stronger. And I've got this new ability, Instigation..."
"It's actually pretty great. Instigation is more than just an ability. It lets me feel what others are feeling—emotions, desires, even malice. It sharpens my thinking and analytical skills. Ha, I'll have to use this to my advantage. Can't have Ciel always making fun of my smarts and performance...
"Even if I don't speak, using Instigation actively will make me seem more reliable and approachable. It'll help folks around me

think better of me."
"With the Instigation ability and some clever talk, I can plant certain thoughts or desires in someone's mind, making them choose to act the way I want..."
After a quick adjustment, Jenna confirmed that her combat skills hadn't improved significantly, but she could be much more valuable in other situations.
"How'd it go? Told you there wouldn't be any trouble," Franca said with a grin, her satisfaction not hidden at all.
Jenna's blue eyes still had traces of black threads in them. She let out a relieved breath and replied, "I was a bit worried earlier."
"That's just the way it is at low Sequences. You'll need to be careful when you move up to Sequence 7," Franca reminded Jenna, ensuring she didn't underestimate the risks of a potion.
Jenna nodded and said to Franca, "I owe you 30,000 verl d'or, including this time. I'll pay you back in installments."
She included the Assassin potion from earlier.
Franca had discussed this with Jenna the night before. She had intended to treat it as a gift. After all, she could continue selling the potion formula and information about the Deep Valley Quarry. However, seeing Jenna's determination, she decided to accept it after some thought.
With a smile, she replied at that moment, "No need to rush. Take your time repaying. You could even stretch it into a 20 or 30-year loan."
Lumian couldn't help but click his tongue and turned to Jenna. "Has the compensation from the Goodville Chemical Factory come through?"
"Imre and Valentine told me the legal process is done. Once the auction wraps up, the assets will be distributed—perhaps in two weeks." Jenna didn't quite grasp why Lumian was suddenly bringing this up. "Julien and I should get around 6,000 verl d'or. We'll split it evenly after settling our debts. Honestly, I don't really want it, but he won't agree for sure."
Lumian nodded and inquired further, "And what about your father's compensation?"
"Because of the Goodville Chemical Factory explosion, the court's given its final say, but the factory owner's dragging his feet. Ugh, is he trying to move his assets out before he pays up?" Jenna's tone carried a hint of anger as she spoke about it.
A chuckle escaped Lumian's lips.
"How about this? We pay a visit to the families waiting for compensation soon. You 'instigate' them, and I'll 'incite' them. We alternate, gather them at the factory owner's place, and demand

what's owed to them. It helps them and gives us a chance to digest the potion."
"The factory owner's got a bunch of armed guards, and he's got ties to the police. What if they hurt the people just asking for their dues? They're already going through so much," Jenna expressed her concern.
Lumian arched an eyebrow and replied, "The court has made its decision. They've got every right to seek their compensation. If anyone dares to fire shots, I promise they won't shoot again. Don't worry, with us around, they'll be safe. Besides, you can give the heads-up to the Purifiers. They'll understand."
Jenna was convinced, her thoughts racing.
"Dammit, you're inciting me!"
While she grumbled, she accepted Lumian's idea and decided to gather information as soon as possible to figure out where the factory owner was now residing.
Simultaneously, another thought crossed her mind. "Now that I'm an Instigator, I need to interact with the entrustee. It's a task from the Purifiers. Franca, when's the next meetup?"
Franca said indignantly, "Next weekend. Reaching out to the entrustee is risky business. The Purifiers are kind of taking advantage of your lack of knowledge by only advancing you one ingredient for the Instigator potion. If it were me, I'd demand a better deal!"
Habitual instigation... Lumian chuckled inwardly.
As Franca and Jenna tidied up the coffee table, Lumian remained seated in an armchair, looking all repulsive.
After a while, Jenna approached him, her body lowering.
Lumian turned his head in surprise.
With a confident smirk, Jenna adjusted her hair.
"I can safely say that you didn't just show up to watch me drink that potion for dealing with Guillaume Bénet."
Her grin was playful and teasing. Though she wasn't wearing makeup, it brought Lumian back to their first meeting when she was an underground singer at Salle de Bal Brise.
Before Lumian could respond, Jenna straightened up and strolled toward the bathroom, leaving behind a casual question.
"Is it really so hard to admit that we're friends and you care about your friends?"
...
On his way back to Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian mulled over his role as Pyromaniac.
He was teetering on the edge of taking the first step towards digesting the potion; his hunger for more acting chances was

insatiable.
Though I must set aflame minds and society, I cannot overlook the elemental act of kindling substances and fulfilling fire's symbolic essence.
Who would be a suitable candidate for burning...
As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian's gaze spotted Baron Brignais.
The mob leader, who usually emulated Gehrman Sparrow, had discarded his customary poise and genteel demeanor. Instead, he marched restlessly and agitatedly along Avenue du Marché, his eyes darting around incessantly.
Lumian fixated on him briefly, though Baron Brignais remained oblivious.
Baffled, he retraced his steps to Salle de Bal Brise and inquired of Sarkota, who had once served under Baron Brignais, "Do you have any knowledge of what happened to Brignais? I observed him in a state of great unease just now."
The reticent Sarkota glanced towards the café's glass window and replied, "Baron Brignais's illegitimate son has gone missing."
Illegitimate son? Gone missing? Lumian's thoughts immediately turned to the young lad Baron Brignais had picked up from the Suhit steam locomotive station.

Chapter 310: Encounter

"How did he go missing?" Lumian asked, puzzled.

Baron Brignais wasn't just a mob leader; he was a Beyonder, too. As long as he was attentive, how could he allow his child to disappear?

Moreover, who in the market district would dare to snatch his child?

Sarkota shook his head. "He didn't provide details."

Could it be the machinations of the Rose School of Thought, striving to expose the truth about the Savoie Mob from Baron Brignais? With recent events woven into the mix, Lumian had some unconfirmed theories.

After a brief pause of thought, he inquired, "Do you know what Brignais's illegitimate son looks like?"

Sarkota nodded. "The baron's underlings came by with a portrait that resembles a photograph."

A portrait that resembles a photograph... Had he invoked ritualistic magic? Lumian's memory recalled the contents of Aurore's grimoires.

Gazing at the brilliant sunlight streaming through the window, he turned to Sarkota.

"Gather some men and aid Brignais."

Regardless of whether the child was ensnared by the Rose School of Thought or had truly gone missing, if they couldn't locate him soon, the outcome would be grim.

At his age, even without additional complications, his fate as a street urchin wouldn't be kind.

"Understood." Sarkota refrained from inquiring why his boss had decided to lend a hand to Baron Brignais.

After all, it wasn't yet noon, and Salle de Bal Brise had just commenced operations. The real hustle and bustle didn't kick in until three or four in the afternoon. Apart from the janitors and kitchen staff, most folks had time aplenty.

Lumian ordered a glass of ice water topped with sugar-infused alcohol and stood on the café's balcony, observing the mobsters interrogating vagrants along Avenue du Marché.

After a while, "Rat" Christo appeared. The diminutive smuggling chief emerged from an alley, trailed by seven or eight dogs of varying hues and breeds, and entered the diagonally opposite alley.

Before long, he drew nearer to Salle de Bal Brise.

At this sight, Lumian finished the remaining alcohol, placed the glass on the railing, and leaped from the second floor to the street.

Christo, his two rat-like whiskers wiggling, approached with a sycophantic grin.
"Good morning, Ciel."
"Are you aiding Brignais in locating his illegitimate son?" Lumian inquired directly.
Christo nodded gently. "Indeed. He personally reached out to me for assistance. Coincidentally, these kids excel at tracking down people."
As the "Rat" spoke, he affectionately patted the dogs' heads.
They alternated between gathering and dispersing, following a distinct scent.
Baron Brignais truly cares for that illegitimate son... Lumian advised "Rat" Christo with a pensive air, "There might be something peculiar about this situation. Stay vigilant. I don't want you to go missing before finding the boy."
The Rose School of Thought being responsible for abducting the boy was always one of the possibilities.
Christo was taken aback, pondered for a moment, and remarked, "There's indeed something amiss. In recent years, we've never heard of Brignais having such a son. Moreover, he holds him in high regard. Why would the boy vanish?"
A sudden appearance of an illegitimate child? Lumian's intuition suggested this might be more intricate than he presumed.
After contemplating briefly, Christo gratefully said, "Ciel, your intellect surpasses mine."
"Don't you possess medicine to enhance your mind?" Lumian inquired, half jesting and half curious.
As Christo allowed the dogs to nuzzle his trousers, he sheepishly smiled and replied, "Indeed, but they're short-term solutions. Their effects are middling, nowhere near the potency of a potion. Damn it, excessive consumption can lead to complications."
Lumian shifted the conversation, asking, "Do you possess authentic mummy ashes?"
Christo assumed an enigmatic expression.
"How much do you require? I can provide you with the best version. That 'Little Minx' Jenna often frequents Franca. She's a tricky one. Just days ago, Franca inquired if I had genuine mummy ashes. Tsk, even the Boss is having trouble."
Ciel also had numerous dancers and actresses as mistresses. Despite his youth, he still relied on medicine.
"I mean true mummy ashes." Lumian stroked his chin.
"I don't." Christo shook his head. "That stuff is ineffective, and I don't know who propagated the falsehood, but I do have a concoction that can satisfy all your paramours. It's composed of

various herbs; I merely claim mummy ashes as the primary ingredient."
"Did Franca buy it?" Lumian inquired with a grin.
"She did." Christo cooperatively chuckled. "Probably because the Boss is too embarrassed to approach me."
Her facade was impeccable. She concealed her true desires from the "Rat," seeking the so-called "ineffective" mummy ashes... Lumian sighed and confessed openly, "I need genuine mummy ashes. They possess mystical uses. Keep an eye out since you often engage with merchants trading in alchemical materials."
"No problem." Christo suspected that Ciel aimed to preserve his dignity and wouldn't acknowledge his quest for such a remedy. He insisted on mysticism as a pretext for seeking mummy ashes but didn't expose him. After all, it was a minor matter.
Observing Christo's persistent search for Baron Brignais's missing illegitimate son with his dogs, Lumian turned on his heel and made his way back to the dance hall.
As he was about to approach the bar counter, Termiboros's commanding voice reverberated in his ears: "To the cellar."
To the cellar... Lumian's initial thought was that the Inevitability angel had something planned.
"Which cellar?" he inquired.
"The one used to store ingredients," replied Termiboros.
So proactive, so eager... What's He plotting? Lumian began to wonder if there was an underlying scheme at play.
Termiboros continued, "It's a stroke of fate for you. Even if you don't go, it will find its way to you. It's destined."
You're giving me chills... Termiboros won't likely put me in immediate danger right now... What could be in that cellar... Lumian contemplated briefly and reckoned that the ingredient storage cellar was usually bustling around noon. In theory, there shouldn't be anything unusual or perilous.
After careful consideration, he decided to head to the cellar, listen at the door, and take a look. If he sensed anything awry, he would write to Madam Magician and inquire if he should heed Termiboros's advice and enter.
Amidst the greetings of the chefs, kitchen helpers, handymen, and dishwashing maids, Lumian crossed through the kitchen and descended the stairs to the ingredient storage cellar.
The cellar's dark-brown wooden door was securely shut, as usual.
Lumian strained his ears, intently listening for any signs of activity.
A faint chewing sound reached his ears.
It wasn't a dramatic sound, devoid of the horrifying notion of a

creature devouring flesh. Rather, it resembled a tramp gnawing on food after a long bout of hunger.
Something's definitely amiss... Lumian cautiously pushed open the cellar door.
The light from the stairs seeped in, revealing a figure.
It was a boy of seven or eight, his back to Lumian. He had short yellow hair, a caramel coat, white stockings, and black strapless leather shoes. Behind him lay a dark red school bag that seemed somewhat weighty and sturdy.
Lumian found the attire oddly familiar.
Suddenly, he recalled where he'd seen it before.
Baron Brignais's illegitimate son!
So, his disappearance led him to hiding in the ingredient cellar of Salle de Bal Brise? Lumian had intended to take a quick glance before shutting the door and leaving to pen a letter to Madam Magician at Auberge du Coq Doré. Yet, upon realizing that the person in the cellar was likely Baron Brignais's illegitimate son, he furrowed his brow slightly and swung open the dark brown wooden door a bit more.
Additional light streamed in, causing the boy to instinctively turn and face the door.
Lumian caught sight of the brass buttons on his clothes, a black-and-white checkered shirt, and a linen coat. He saw a face with evident baby fat, unperturbed but vacant brown eyes, and a mouth smeared with blood.
The boy clutched a few raw steaks tinged with a dark red hue in his hand. His mouth kept opening and closing as he chewed on a vague mass of flesh resembling a rat. Its thin black tail gently swayed near his lips.
Lumian narrowed his eyes and slipped his left hand into his pocket.
The boy remained unperturbed, his gaze vacant as he continued staring at Lumian. He chewed a few more times before swallowing the bloody rat, tail and all.
Lumian arched an eyebrow and asked, "Are you Brignais's illegitimate son?"
"No," the boy mumbled, nibbling at a piece of raw steak.
"Then what's your connection?" Lumian queried in a "peaceful" manner.
After a while of eating raw steak, the boy answered, "He's my godfather and guardian in Trier."
Remarkably precise Intisian, hardly any accent... Lumian regarded the peculiar boy with puzzlement and probed, "Are you running away from home?"

"Yes," the boy replied, blood staining his mouth as he continued nibbling on the raw steak.
Behind him stretched a thick darkness, enveloped by the dim light from the corridor.
"Why did you flee from your godfather? Do you need me to help you return?" Lumian asked, offering a friendly smile, noticing that the other party was more amicable in conversation.
The boy shook his head vigorously.
"No! I don't want to go back to attending classes, studying, doing homework, taking practice tests, and sitting for exams!"
Wh— The boy's reasoning left Lumian oddly bewildered, as if he had glimpsed his own past.
He was intelligent and had no trouble attending classes, reading, or taking exams. He absorbed knowledge swiftly, but he disliked homework or practice tests. He relied on Aurore's "heartfelt education" to barely persevere. He often wished he could rope in Reimund, Ava, and his friends to do those tasks for him.
Is this rat-chewing enigma the fateful encounter Termiboros alluded to? Lumian pondered and inquired, "You don't seem to be from Intis?"
With an honest demeanor and a bloodied mouth, the boy responded, "I'm from Lenburg."

Chapter 311: Strange Boy

Lenburg? Baron Brignais's illegitimate son or godchild resides in Lenburg? Lumian was puzzled, his mind racing with playful guesses.

Baron Brignais places a high value on education, entrusting his most beloved child to the kingdom of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom for learning...

Lumian studied the young lad before him and asked in a laid-back tone, "Aren't you supposed to be hitting the books in Lenburg at your age? The education there is leagues ahead of what Trier offers."

The boy's face lit up with an oddly animated expression. "Nah, I'm not up for the daily grind of school, burning the midnight oil over homework, and tackling exams every month!"

Sounds a little terrifying... A shiver trickled down Lumian's spine at the thought of such a life.

At the very least, it didn't sit right with him.

Agreeing with a nod, Lumian casually asked, "Are live rats tasty?"

The boy regained his composure. "It's not exactly gourmet, but I can't be choosy when hunger gnaws. Waiting till midday to raid the kitchen doesn't cut it. True bliss is savoring a meal whipped up by a maestro chef. And some mild hunger pangs do add a certain... flair."

After explaining, he must have felt he came across too mature and quickly recalibrated.

"Can't blame me if your kitchen's dragging its feet until noon!"

Well, that's hardly the point, now, is it? When I was wandering about without a proper place to stay, I sure as heck didn't have any notions of munching on live rats. The big issue, of course, was that I couldn't even catch the pesky things. And if by some miracle I did, then I had to somehow figure out how to set up a fire, skin them, and roast them. But this kid right here? He's out here grabbing rats, using nothing but his own bare hands. His strength or maybe just his good luck isn't half bad, I'll give him that. It's not even an hour away from noon, and he's acting like he's got an insatiable hunger? The more Lumian looked at him, the more he was convinced there was something peculiar about this little lad.

Amused, he inquired, "Brignais didn't bother to feed you, then? Need me to escort you to the police headquarters so you can lodge a complaint about his child abuse?"

"Well, aside from pestering me about my studies, he's alright. He makes sure I have a proper meal every two hours. On top of that, he whips up cakes, biscuits, roasted meat, and pies for those

midnight hunger pangs." A subtle lick of the lips revealed the boy's longing.
Are you a pig? Lumian had never eaten so much while undergoing puberty.
And yet, the lad didn't appear overweight, only solidly built.
In the blink of an eye, the boy's gaze shifted as he spoke in rapid succession, "Perhaps studying demands a lot of energy. I need all this sustenance to keep my brain firing on all cylinders."
Is there no saying about how "trying to explain is just a cover-up" in Lenburg's education? Your elaborate justification makes me wonder if your appetite is problematic... All this eating hasn't exactly made you a genius, has it? Lumian grinned and quipped, "If Brignais wasn't intentionally starving you, why resort to raw rats and steak?"
In a frustrated tone, the boy retorted, "I managed to slip away without breakfast or morning tea today!"
And yet, you're so famished that you're downing raw rats? If you go hungry for another half day or so, will you start eying pedestrians on the street? With a fluid motion, Lumian produced an iron-gray military flask from his shirt pocket.
His left hand slid into his trouser pocket, deftly unscrewing the cap of the flask before tucking it away.
Lumian raised the iron-gray metal flask, breathing in the fragrance with a satisfied grin. He inquired, his voice light, "Fancy a sip?"
Gulp! The boy's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed his saliva.
Struggling, he responded, "I'm not of age yet. I'm just a kid!"
He's tasted it before, and he's taken a liking to it... Lumian passed his judgment and swallowed a mouthful of the spirit.
Maintaining the military flask at his lips, he spoke in a casual tone, a question hanging in the air, "Which deity do you believe in?"
"Why're you asking?" the boy inquired cautiously.
Seeing the lack of alarm, Lumian breathed a sigh of relief. He tipped the flask again, the liquid gurgling.
He lowered the military flask, his expression bright as he spoke with clarity, "As a devout follower of the God of Steam and Machinery, I've got to verify the faith of those with uncertain origins."
"By steam!"
This time, Lumian spoke without the veil of alcohol.
Subconsciously, the boy shook his head.
"Words don't mean much. Just saying I believe in whichever deity doesn't make it true."

Lumian studied the boy's reaction. "It's true that folks from the orthodox Churches can sometimes claim belief in any deity without much sincerity, but they're harmless. I'm more concerned about worshipers of evil gods. They're fervent and unpredictable. They won't fake it to deceive others, believing that to be against their faith and blasphemous."

Instinctively, the boy retorted, "Not always. Some followers of evil gods will pose as adherents of the orthodox gods to further their holy missions. They can pray, attend rituals, join Mass, and chant the names of other gods without a second thought—as long as they repent to their own deity afterward, they reckon there's no issue..."

At that moment, the young lad abruptly halted. He exchanged gazes with Lumian and lapsed into a prolonged silence.

After a spell, he took a bite out of his uncooked steak and introduced himself, "I'm a believer of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom. The devoted faithful in our Church have this peculiar knack for pointing out slip-ups in the other party's speech, just like before. Yep, just like before!"

Lumian fixed a piercing gaze on the lad for a few beats before inquiring, "What might be the usual prayers at the God of Knowledge and Wisdom Church?"

Quick as a flash, the boy responded, "Like I was saying earlier, folks who believe in those evil gods can mutter the honorific name of an orthodox god with a heavy heart and toss out those prayers. You can't rightly figure out what's in others' minds unless you're a card-carrying member of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church and you've got it notarized that you won't lie..."

With that, the lad clammed up once more, his gaze fixed vacantly on Lumian.

After a brief pause, he stretched out his empty right hand, and pressed it to his forehead. "May wisdom be with you!"

Such a foolish fellow shouldn't be a spy sent by an evil god... From his intelligence, he's really a child... Lumian struggled to maintain his composure, requiring a concealed deep breath to regain control over his facial muscles.

"Indeed," he concurred, his lips curving into a smile. Mirroring the boy's action, he brushed his head with the base of the iron-gray military flask and uttered with significance, "May wisdom be with you!"

Without affording the boy a chance to reply, Lumian adopted an alluring tone. "Would you care to join me at the café on the second floor? I'll treat you to a proper meal. The chefs here are quite remarkable."

The boy swallowed visibly. "You won't turn against me, will you?"
"You can tail me the entire time. That way, I won't ever get a shot at double-crossing you." Lumian initiated a little trial, testing if the other guy's brains matched his looks and age, or maybe they lagged behind. "And mind you, we only prohibit the God of Knowledge and Wisdom Church from preaching in Intis or setting up a cathedral. We do let their believers cross the border. Trier's got the Lenburg Chamber of Commerce, you see."
The boy pondered for a moment and said, "Okay."
Lumian sized him up, withdrew his left hand, sealed the liquor flask, and tucked the iron-gray flask back in his brown coat.
Then, he pressed his forehead again. "May wisdom be with you!"
With that, Lumian pivoted and ascended the stairs.
The kid stuck to him, politely shutting the cellar's deep-brown door behind him.
Seeing Lumian whirl around, the kid explained earnestly, "If it's left open, the food inside will spoil."
"True enough." Lumian pulled his gaze and climbed up the stairs.
The kid trailed him close, eyes peeled for any odd moves, any signs of betrayal.
Lumian steered him into the kitchen, then upstairs to the café on the second floor and ordered a set meal.
In no time, the spread hit the table: fried veal steak, grilled eel, roasted leg of lamb, chicken pie, red wine, and cream.
Lumian settled in, watching the kid wolfing down like he was bottomless.
Every now and then, he tossed a comment,
"Veal is crisped good, but the meat is nothing special...
"Sweet sauce masks the eel's fishiness, but it makes it greasy...
"Leg of lamb is roasted just right, crispy outside, tender inside. Spices are off a touch, though. Too much fennel...
"..."
Just eat. Why are you so talkative... Lumian silently watched the boy eat the table full of food with a satisfied expression.
Fifteen minutes later, Baron Brignais walked in from the second-floor entrance, donning a half top hat with a diamond ring shining.
The boy turned in surprise and glanced back at Lumian.
Lumian smiled and said, "Did you think I'm the only one here who knows you?"
The boy was startled as he fell silent.
Baron Brignais walked up to Lumian and said with unconcealed relaxation, "Appreciate it, Ciel."
"Just so happened to catch him skulking around in the cellar,

munching on something," Lumian responded, his voice warm and friendly.

Baron Brignais gave him a sidelong glance before shifting his attention to the boy. "Time to head back, Ludwig."

Ludwig, the young boy, remained silent. Swiftly, he polished off the last remnants of his meal and rose from his seat.

"Ciel, we'll catch up," Baron Brignais directed a nod at Lumian.

Seated opposite, Lumian observed as Baron Brignais clasped Ludwig's hand, their departure imminent. Lumian's lips curved again before saying, "Don't forget to settle the tab."

Baron Brignais displayed a hint of surprise. His eyes flickered, suggesting a momentary uncertainty in his initial assessment.

Yet without uttering a word, he withdrew a wallet brimming with banknotes and promptly covered the cost of Ludwig's meal.

Lumian maintained a contemplative silence, watching the duo disappear down the stairwell. Leaning back in his chair, he murmured softly, his voice a mere whisper, "Temiboros, where exactly is the stroke of fate you mentioned?"

Chapter 312: Hint

Though Lumian maintained a cautious skepticism toward Termiboros, his curiosity about the enigmatic "stroke of fate" continued to gnaw at him.

The way Termiboros had alluded to the Earth Blood ore as an "encounter" had caught his attention. Could this time involve Ludwig, the young boy?

There was something off about this fellow, something amiss. Yet, as their conversation unfolded, Lumian came to acknowledge Ludwig's intelligence, origins, and apparent devotion to the God of Knowledge and Wisdom. Despite this interaction, Lumian found himself gaining no true insights or foresight. It was unlike his understanding of the Earth Blood ore's potential, which hinged on specific conditions of going underground, finding the right area to encounter something.

Once again, Termiboros's powerful voice reverberated through Lumian.

"The moment will reveal itself."

"Can't you people make yourself clear?" Lumian's frustration surged, his blood boiling in his veins..

"I'm unlike what you consider people," Termiboros responded, straightforwardly. "I'm a Mythical Creature."

"..." Lumian was left speechless, taken aback. He forced a scoff and retorted, "I doubt even your sealed form can truly grasp fate's threads. Each time, your answers are mired in vagueness. What sets you apart from amateurs in the Divination Club? If you possess the power, reveal clearly where my next opportunity lies!"

Termiboros responded with a deep tone, "Tonight, at 11 p.m., Rist Docks, Warehouse 3."

Huh? Surprise coursed through Lumian; Termiboros's hint was unexpected.

Yet, within his astonishment, puzzlement persisted.

Inevitability's angel is that kind?

As a high-ranking Alms Monk, He shouldn't have been provoked so easily to interpret my fate...

Could there be an ulterior motive?

Regardless, I'll consult Madam Magician's insight first.

Lumian decided swiftly. He rose, departed Salle de Bal Brise, and embarked on a journey to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Executing a simple act of arson, he could initiate the initial potion digestion step and contemplate gaining a Contractee boon. Despite his anxiety, Lumian refused to lower his guard against Termiboros.

Within Rue des Blouses Blanches, in the safe house.
Lumian meticulously documented the particulars regarding Ludwig and Termiboros's clue. Subsequently, he conducted a ritual, summoning the doll-like messenger.
As Lumian awaited Madam Magician's response, he delved into a trove of information concerning spirit world creatures. Reading the descriptions of certain knowledge consumed a substantial amount of his spirituality. Some even induced dizziness, nausea, frustration, headache, a burning sensation, and illusions.
Similar to Aurore's grimoires' portrayal of profound knowledge about deities and high-level creatures, this information is fraught with intense corruption and perilous ramifications. If all the knowledge that pursues humans bear such attributes, it's genuinely chilling. The prospect of losing oneself upon hearing it or succumbing to immediate demise is unsettling... Thus, Lumian punctuated his reading to safeguard his mental well-being from plummeting to precarious thresholds.
After poring through descriptions of approximately 30 to 40 spirit world creatures, Lumian stumbled upon a figure he recognized.
"Rabbit of Knowledge:
"Weak spirit world creature, friendly to humans and possesses an innate thirst for knowledge. Their summons are rarely declined.
"Diverse experiences yield distinct Rabbits of Knowledge. Shared traits include mastery of various languages, spoken and written communication skills, and adept reading capabilities. Extracting salient information from extensive knowledge is their forte, and their transcription speed outpaces even mechanical typewriters.
"Drawback: Limited communication finesse and inflexible thinking. Some Rabbits of Knowledge have been tainted by anomalous knowledge, evolving into significant hazards. To summon, restrict choices to the friendly and weak."
So, it goes by the name "Rabbit of Knowledge." Summoning this entity in the future should be more targeted... Yet, its abilities and attributes are of limited value. If I had gone as per Aurore's vision of university enrollment, I would benefit from its multilingual proficiency and strong reading skills... Noteworthy, the text omits mention of its speed within the spirit realm, implying its negligible worth in that aspect. It moves sluggishly, drains spirituality... Lumian lowered the document, massaged his temples, and embarked on his third respite.
During this juncture, the messenger bore Madam Magician's response:
"I share curiosity regarding what encounter the lad named Ludwig would bring. His appearance in Trier intrigues me; motivations

remain nebulous.
"Vigilance is prudent. His existence carries intrigue.
"Proceed. The window of acting presents itself to me as well."
Can't you people make things clear... Lumian's lips twitched, absorbing the succinct message.
However, a nuanced sense emerged that Madam Magician's opening sentence wasn't an immediate response. It resonated more as a condensed echo of her contemplations.
In essence, Madam Magician, imbued with her astromancy prowess, struggled to glean Ludwig's fate. Her perceptions seemed clouded, suggesting she only harbored conjectures.
The obscurity surrounding Ludwig's destiny, evident in her inability to perceive it, spoke volumes.
...
At 10:50 p.m., at Rist Docks, outside Warehouse 3.
Lumian took cover in the shadows, poised to seize the much-anticipated opening for action.
Soon enough, two silhouettes approached Warehouse 3, drawing within a mere five to six meters of Lumian.
One of them spoke hushedly, riddled with concern, "Héctor, the accountants arrive tomorrow for an audit. How do we address this? Shall I hire a thief to pilfer the account records?"
"What purpose would that serve? The moment they inspect the warehouse, suspicion will arise. Our remaining stock barely equals a tenth of the required amount." Héctor's tone escalated, simmering with intensity. "If we're to proceed, we ought to do so comprehensively by reducing the warehouse to ashes. This way, any discrepancies would remain concealed."
I see... Listening closely, Lumian deduced his cue to act.
As his companion wavered, Héctor interjected, "Fires are commonplace in Trier, normalized in everyone's mind. Moreover, igniting them ourselves isn't necessary. The market district swarms with miscreants and rogues. Once the time is ripe, we can entice them to vacate Trier with a handsome fee.
"Honoré, we can't wait any longer. You must decide now."
Honoré paused, then spoke resolutely, "Agreed! We'll locate Guy and recruit him into our plan!"
The duo conducted a swift survey of the warehouse's surroundings before departing for the docks, en route to rendezvous with their comrade, Guy.
After a brief trek, the sky abruptly reddened, casting an incandescent hue across the scene. Simultaneously, the crackle of flames resounded.
Honoré and Héctor instinctively spun around, bearing witness to

an inferno emerging. Vermilion flames surged, fierce and ravenous, soaring to engulf the structure.
"Fire, fire..." Héctor mumbled, a glint of realization dawning. "Indeed, fire! Praise the Sun, it's a fire!"
Honoré exhibited a similar reaction, his right hand tracing a triangular Sacred Emblem over his chest, lips moving in muted invocation.
Yet, within the momentary elation, disquiet brewed within Honoré's senses.
Trepidation tinted his voice as he discerned, "The warehouse isn't aflame. It's our office!"
Positioned meters away from the warehouse was their office—a modest gray two-story edifice.
The expanse separating it from the warehouse remained empty, devoid of combustible material.
"..." Héctor's visage contorted in terror. Clenching his jaw, he spoke with grim resolve, "We must set fire to the warehouse now!"
Even as the words left his lips, an explosion erupted from the locus of crimson flames.
Though not seismic, the detonation garnered the attention of dock workers and firefighters.
"Fire! Fire!" The clamor resounded as responders converged. In Trier, a city renowned for frequent conflagrations, firefighters were seasoned in addressing such crises.
Observing the scene, Héctor and Honoré, who hadn't reached Warehouse 3, slumped onto the roadside, their vigor sapped.
At the entrance of the dock.
Albus, his hair now a fiery hue, averted his gaze from the raging blaze to the middle-aged man at his side.
"Monsieur Guy, your colleague seems even more agitated than you."
Guy's complexion paled as he shook his head in bewilderment.
"The warehouse wasn't the target of the fire..."
A pause lingered before Albus sneered.
"I warned you already. Hesitation begets mishaps. Now, ponder your escape. May you be more decisive this time."
Beside the unassuming two-story structure, Lumian gazed upon the soaring flames. The timber and flammable materials metamorphosed into an ephemeral dragon, casting his countenance in fiery red, eyes alight with fervor.
With a grin, he advanced toward the blaze.
The duo's intent to commit arson entailed erasing incriminating evidence by reducing the warehouse to ashes. However, Lumian's purpose was to generate turmoil, inviting scrutiny that would

unearth the discrepancies within the warehouse!
Such was the duty of a responsible citizen.
A mantle of flames enveloped Lumian, adhering to his attire obediently—merely a hair's breadth from ignition.
Donning the flaming cloak, Lumian marched into the roaring blaze.
Fire coalesced with fire, repelling smoke. Effortlessly traversing the structure, Lumian exited on the opposite end of the dock.
Following the arson, Lumian acquired a rudimentary mastery over the potion's powers. He tamed it, dispelling the burning sensation on his skin and the trepidation in his heart.
While his potion digestion remained incomplete, Lumian had already adapted to his present state, giving him the capacity to receive an additional Inevitability boon.
...
After carrying out a few rounds of anti-tracking, Lumian returned to the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Initiating the initial step of digesting the Pyromaniac potion prior to tracking down the padre filled him with satisfaction. He maintained a smile, yet his demeanor faltered upon glimpsing the towering pile of dense information within the iron cabinet.
It would take at least a month or two to finish reading them!
How could he identify an apt contracted creature in so brief a span?

Chapter 313: Plans with Different Styles

Lumian stood before the iron cabinet, his mind immersed in contemplation.

With just a handful of days remaining until the date designated by the Prophecy Spell, Lumian earnestly aspired to secure Contractee status, thereby attaining three distinctive abilities. This enhancement was imperative prior to pursuing Guillaume Bénet. The augmentation would tip the odds in his favor.

Relying solely on Pyromaniac, even in collaboration with Franca, now a Demoness of Pleasure, and the support of Anthony Reid and Jenna, prevailing against the padre's uncanny abilities remained tenuous. Victory might be attainable, but apprehending the adversary without incurring losses was a near-impossible endeavor—except if he enlisted the assistance of the Aurora Order Oracle via Mr. K's finger.

This assessment solely considered Guillaume Bénet as Lumian's adversary. If the padre had other confederates, alongside a cohort of bestowers or Beyonders, and if he had grown mightier than his state upon departing Cordu, Lumian's undertaking wouldn't assure triumph—even with Mr. K.

Lumian's aspiration was to pinpoint the padre's whereabouts and engineer a snare, drawing him out. Such an approach would markedly simplify the process. Nevertheless, Lumian needed to bolster his strength substantially. Otherwise, the "fishing" operation would entail dire jeopardy.

As Lumian perused the stack of dense information concerning spirit world entities, his mind whirled, seeking avenues to locate a suitable contract partner within a constrained timeframe.

Should I designate a time frame for reading and strive to cover as much ground as feasible? Then, my selection must derive from my existing familiarity?

This proposition falls short of my expectations. It risks bypassing the most fitting opportunity...

Although the circumstances aren't optimal, I must reconcile with reality. Perfection remains elusive; I must confront my own limitations head-on.

Son of a sow, it hasn't reached a juncture necessitating blind acceptance!

For now, I'll withhold any definitive moves until I ascertain the padre's whereabouts next week. I'll bide my time. Following the completion of this information assimilation, a comprehensive strategy will crystallize, right?

It will take approximately a month. The potential for accidents

looms large...
Uh, the Rabbit of Knowledge appears to have the ability to read and extract key points. Can I summon one to help me read the information and extract the keywords of every spirit world creature, like when I whistleblowed? Then, I'll carefully study the corresponding spirit world creatures based on the keywords...
It's a creature of the spirit world to begin with. Having come into contact with such knowledge, it will definitely be less affected than me and can last longer...
Lumian gradually grew excited. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that it was feasible to ask the Rabbit of Knowledge to help him do the reading and write a brief summary.
He swiftly perfected the corresponding plan.
That rabbit is quite stupid and silly. I have to design a table in advance and list the 'page number', 'strength', 'whether it's friendly', 'brief description of abilities', and 'points of characteristics'. I'll let it fill in the columns in step and order.
Unfortunately, a person can only summon one Rabbit of Knowledge at a time. Otherwise, if I had ten or twenty, I will be able to complete the summary on spirit world creatures before dawn...
If one person can only summon one, what about having more than one person?
I can have Franca, Jenna, and Anthony Reid summon one each for me!
Uh... Rabbits can read quickly, extract essential points, and fill out summaries. Humans can do the same. Franca, Jenna, and Anthony can help browse through the information and quickly extract keywords from the columns.
I'll contribute knowledge, and they contribute labor, spirituality, and time!
Lumian's eyes grew brighter and brighter. He felt that if he pushed this plan forward, even with frequent breaks to mentally recover and the time to summon a Rabbit of Knowledge again, he should be able to produce a summary on the spirit world creatures in twelve hours.
When the time came, he would browse through the summaries that wouldn't affect his mind and select 20 to 30 suitable ones. He would read the raw information in a targeted fashion and make a final decision.
The only problem now was that the information on these spirit world creatures had been provided by Madam Magician; Lumian hadn't exchanged it using contributions or money. He believed that before "sharing" with others, he had to obtain the approval of the

Major Arcana card holder.
This was basic respect.
Lumian sprang into action without hesitation. Swiftly, he composed a letter outlining his inquiry and the comprehensive plan he had crafted.
Soon, Madam Magician responded: "For a moment, I don't know what to say about your idea. It appears you possess an aptitude for such considerations.
"Sharing your knowledge with your friends is permissible, but remember to advise them against engaging with powerful or perilous spirit world creatures. These entities hold no sway over you, thanks to Mr. Fool's seal. It serves as a deterrent in the spirit world, offering you a measure of protection that others lack."
"Actually, there are simpler and easier ways:
"Take the information to Two of Cups and spread it in every corner of the room. Then, get Two of Cups to recite the divination statement repeatedly and throw out three tarot cards or three coins.
"Choose whichever spirit world creature they land on. Even if it's not the most suitable for you, it's relatively suitable. It might be useful in a future occasion."
Hiss, what a brilliant charlatan! Madam Magician is indeed skilled in divination. Her style is completely different from mine... Lumian hadn't considered divination.
After careful consideration, he decided to follow his plan. The answer chosen through divination always felt unreliable and unreal. He subconsciously didn't want to rely on it.
By relying on his own intelligence and abilities to filter them out, he would feel more confident and convinced.
Unless there was no other way, Lumian hoped to finish "reading" the information before making a choice.
He burned Madam Magician's reply and carefully wrote up the form. For the time being, he only made five copies.
Immediately after, he set up the altar to see if he could accurately summon the Rabbit of Knowledge.
To this end, the summoning incantation he had devised was: "Rabbit-shaped spirit wandering in the void, a friendly creature that can be communicated with, a weakling who pursues knowledge."
The choice to avoid using the human-coined "Rabbit of Knowledge" as its name spoke of Lumian's respect for the enigmatic nature of these creatures.
Having carefully considered his approach, Lumian ignited a solitary candle and made a summoning in his own name.

His incantation concluded, and the candle's flame transformed into a deep shade of green, expanding to resemble a human head in size.
From within the luminous green flame, a translucent creature emerged, its appearance reminiscent of an amusingly awkward rabbit.
Relief washed over Lumian as the ritual proved successful. The creature's presence signaled a triumph, and Lumian's experienced voice addressed it, "I wish to share knowledge with you, seeking your assistance in distilling key points and completing a form."
The rabbit's eyes brightened, and in a tone that mimicked Lumian's voice and Trier's Intisian accent, it inquired, "Where is the knowledge?"
This was the first time Lumian had heard such a creature speak. He didn't expect it to imitate his tone and pronunciation.
With purpose, Lumian retrieved a stack of information about spirit world creatures he had yet to delve into. He gestured towards the form on the table, articulating the task's parameters in a manner befitting a creature of limited intellect.
The rabbit absorbed Lumian's guidance, its long ears drooping as it committed the instructions to memory. Eventually, it nodded in comprehension.
Seated at Lumian's desk, the rabbit's eyes sparkled as it engaged with the information.
Lumian noted with satisfaction that, despite its unwilling nature, the rabbit demonstrated proficiency in its repetitive task. It diligently extracted pertinent details and methodically filled out the form with words like "powerful" and "dangerous."
Although it's not very smart, doing such repetitive work isn't a problem for it... It's at least twice as fast as my reading... Lumian nodded in satisfaction and lay on the bed, preparing to close his eyes and rest while the Rabbit of Knowledge was busy working to alleviate his fatigue.
After an unknown period of time, he suddenly sensed danger and hurriedly sat up.
He saw that the transparent rabbit had grown to two meters tall, constantly flipping through the information and extracting.
"Stop!" Lumian didn't understand what was happening and instinctively stopped the other party from coming into contact with the knowledge.
The rabbit turned its head, its eyes bloodshot.
After staring at Lumian for a few seconds, it reluctantly halted its work.
Lumian's introspection led him to deduce the cause behind this

transformation.
As a creature of the spirit world, the Rabbit of Knowledge was similarly affected by that knowledge, albeit to a relatively mild extent. However, it wasn't like ordinary humans due to its lacking intelligence. It didn't know to stop and rest after an abnormality unless it directly endangered its life.
As it accumulated, it inevitably underwent a certain mutation.
Phew, it's useful—that's true, but not having much intelligence is a huge problem... Lumian ended the summoning and allowed the Rabbit of Knowledge to return to the spirit world and slowly recover.
He washed up briefly, lay on the bed, and prepared to rest.
An idea surfaced just before sleep claimed him. Lumian summoned the rabbit once more and directed it to replicate a hundred copies of the form he had devised.
Only then did he truly relax and fall asleep.
...
The following morning, Lumian was brimming with vigor as he set off for Rue Anarchie. His first stop was to locate Anthony Reid, the information broker, and discuss the potential of his assistance.
As he approached Auberge du Coq Doré, a figure emerged from a nearby side alley.
It was Baron Brignais, adorned in a half top hat and a formal black suit, mahogany-colored pipe in hand.
"I promised to catch up with you and express my gratitude for aiding me in finding Ludwig," Baron Brignais began with a smile. "It's quite surprising to find you neither at Salle de Bal Brise nor Auberge du Coq Doré."
Gratitude? Then help me read and write a summary! Lumian muttered subconsciously before swiftly dismissing the notion.
Compared to Anthony Reid, an information broker with a mental illness, Baron Brignais was not only a member of the Savoie Mob, but his background also seemed problematic. It was best not to let him discover that his relationship with Franca didn't rely solely on Jenna.
A smile tugged at Lumian's lips.
"The night offers its own beauty. It's pointless to remain confined within one's room. How do you intend to express your gratitude?"
Rather than providing a direct answer, Baron Brignais diverted the conversation. "I may not have mentioned this earlier, but I converted to the worship of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom a few years back."

Chapter 314: Crowd-Sourcing

Did you communicate with your godson and come to me to confirm the situation? Lumian maintained his smile.

"What you believe has no bearing on me, as long as you don't subscribe to an evil god. Furthermore, devotees of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom are not wanted criminals in Trier."

His implication was clear: "I'm still a wanted criminal. Believe what you will."

Baron Brignais had always been astute. He changed the subject and continued, "Thank you for aiding me in locating Ludwig. I'm unsure how to adequately express my gratitude."

He refrained from specifying a thank-you gift, hoping to gauge Lumian's stance and thoughts.

Lumian pondered briefly before recalling the idea he had set aside.

Getting Baron Brignais to assist with reading and summarizing didn't necessitate his presence alongside Franca, Jenna, and Anthony Reid. He could impart some information, clarify what he needed to focus on, and allow him to return home to peruse and transcribe.

Likewise, before Anthony Reid committed to joining the pursuit of Padre Guillaume Bénet, direct contact with Jenna and Franca couldn't be allowed. An isolated "office" could be arranged for him at a later time.

Lumian glanced at Baron Brignais and inquired deliberately, "Are you proficient in reading and drafting notes?"

Aurore's grimoires had denoted that the pathway under the Church of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom was labeled Reader. This was also the title of Sequence 9 potion. Sequence 8 was Student of Ratiocination, and Sequence 7 was Detective.

Given Baron Brignais rarely exhibited special abilities and mostly leveraged his exceptional intellect, above-average combat skills, and sharp marksmanship to lead the Savoie Mob, coupled with his present faith, Lumian speculated he was a Beyonder of the Reader path.

From the potion's nomenclature alone, one could infer such an individual excelled in reading.

Baron Brignais drew from his pipe and responded, "In contrast to the illiterate, my reading and learning aptitude is rather commendable."

He couldn't entirely fathom Ciel's intentions, yet he suspected Ciel was prying into his Beyonder pathway.

And it wasn't confidential. Gardner Martin had long been privy to this.

Lumian unveiled a genuine smile.
"Of late, I've acquired a trove of information concerning creatures from the spirit world. However, as you're aware—you should be aware, correct? Delving into such knowledge extensively exerts a significant toll on the mind. As a Beyonder of the Hunter path, I shan't require this information for an extended period. Nevertheless, I wish to have access to the pertinent knowledge when necessity arises, without squandering precious time. Therefore, I intend to furnish you with a portion of the data. Kindly assist me in reading and extracting the key terms."
"Much akin to constructing an index for a library." Baron Brignais promptly grasped.
He grinned and remarked, "Truthfully, this would prove advantageous to me. That knowledge holds considerable value."
Library index... As anticipated of an adherent of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom. How professional... Lumian rejoiced, sensing Baron Brignais was roughly on par with Anthony Reid combined with a Rabbit of Knowledge.
Simultaneously, he harbored a cautious sentiment toward Baron Brignais. For instance, he would furnish this God of Knowledge and Wisdom follower with ten pages of information. He would peruse them in advance and jot down notes. Subsequently, he would cross-reference them with the index submitted by Baron Brignais to discern any deliberate omissions or alterations.
Of course, this was Lumian's unrefined approach. He could alternatively beseech Franca to verify via divination, but the potential for interference still existed.
Lumian slid his hands into his pockets and surveyed Baron Brignais, akin to an artisan observing a laborer. He beamed and uttered, "I'm indifferent to who benefits, as long as I accomplish my objective."
Baron Brignais nodded faintly, refraining from further commentary. He solely apprised Lumian of his whereabouts the following morning and requested the information to be conveyed there.
Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 305.
Facing Anthony Reid, Lumian eased back and reiterated his words to Baron Brignais. Concluding, he voiced, "This knowledge serves as your compensation. Furthermore, I shall impart to you the knowledge of ritualistic magic. You'll be able to summon a unique spirit world creature to peruse the information alongside you and distill the essential points. How does that proposition strike you? Are you inclined to accept this assignment?"
Anthony Reid's deep brown eyes mirrored Lumian's form as he

contemplated and responded, "You're pressed for time. This matter bears added weight for you. It carries great significance."
Lumian had no intention of concealing this. He seized the opportunity and conveyed, "I'm confronted with the need to face a formidable adversary soon, and I seek to secure a fitting contracted creature. When the moment arrives, I might extend you an invitation, primarily in a supportive role. You can consider whether to agree and what form of compensation you desire. Heh heh, there's no rush for an answer. Think over it for the next two days."
"You're paving the way for me to be mentally prepared and foster appropriate expectations." Anthony Reid deciphered Lumian's thoughts.
Instantly, Lumian felt a twinge of embarrassment, but he was never one to blush easily. He maintained a composed smile and articulated, "Can you not tell that being honest will put your life in danger?"
Anthony Reid offered a slight nod, affirming certain aspects prior to committing to aid in perusing the information and crafting the "summary."
...
On the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise, in the room adjacent to Lumian's quarters.
Lumian surveyed Anthony Reid and the Rabbit of Knowledge, seated in tandem, diligently sifting through the information and completing forms. He subtly nodded in relief.
Once more, he reiterated the caution not to delve deeply into the spirit world creature knowledge marked as "powerful" and "dangerous." Exiting the room, he entered the office at the corridor's end.
Franca cozied up in Lumian's armchair, her red-booted feet propped on the desk's edge.
Baffled and intrigued, she inquired, "What exactly do you need our help with? Why are you being so mysterious?"
Jenna settled into the chair across from her, turning her body as her gaze drifted to the door.
Lumian nonchalantly shut the door and recounted the scenario, elucidating his need to secure a contracted creature prior to confronting the padre.
"Wouldn't a simple divination suffice?" Franca pondered as she acquiesced to Lumian's entreaty, while Jenna simmered with curiosity about the spirit world creatures.
Before long, Franca gazed up at the trio of Rabbits of Knowledge and Jenna, as well as Lumian, each absorbed in their respective

tasks of poring over documents. Amusement laced her voice as she quipped, "Why does this feel like a miniature workshop, and we're the toiling transcribers?"
Congratulations, your instincts are on point... Lumian retorted in jest, "Am I not also perusing the information and completing forms?"
Franca mulled it over and conceded. She resumed her "labors."
And so, they persisted until well past 10 p.m., punctuating their efforts with numerous breaks—meals, siestas, catnaps—to mitigate the strain. Brief reprieves preceded the summoning of the Rabbits of Knowledge once more.
Intermittently, during his short intervals, Lumian observed Franca, Jenna, Anthony Reid, and the quartet of Rabbits of Knowledge. He remained vigilant to prevent them from becoming too engrossed and to detect any anomalies they might experience.
Jenna reached her threshold first. Having newly ascended to Instigator, she hadn't fully acclimated to the potion's effects and was grappling with containing the surge of power. Her state was less than optimal.
Anthony Reid followed suit. His psychological scars ran deep, rendering him susceptible to certain deviations.
Lumian, Franca, and the seventh set of Rabbits of Knowledge soldiered on till the end.
Baron Brignais concluded his task around 6 p.m. and delivered the documents and forms to the café.
After dismissing the summons and seeing off the fatigued "assistants," Lumian returned to the safehouse on Rue des Blouses Blanches, arranging the forms in a neat stack.
Perusing the papers briefly, he confirmed the general state of affairs. A sense of accomplishment swelled within him as he casually tossed the forms onto the table.
The immediate selection wasn't on his agenda. His plan was to first establish a Contractee status and sort out the specifics of the contract. Only afterward would he consult the index, thereby preventing the likelihood of stumbling upon a spirit world creature that matched his criteria in all respects but failed to meet the contract stipulations.
Lumian rested for a spell before summoning a Rabbit of Knowledge and tasking it with duplicating two more forms.
Storing the three indices separately, Lumian's weariness was palpable. The prospect of cleansing himself seemed distant as he tumbled onto the bed and surrendered to sleep.
...
At 6 a.m., Lumian brimmed with vigor, showing no haste to

descend underground, arrange an altar, and beseech for a boon. Instead, he engaged in his usual regimen: jogging, practicing boxing, and cultivating his mental equilibrium.
By nearly 8 a.m., he stood before the doorway to Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré, ingredients at the ready.
After a brief internal debate, Lumian ultimately seized the carbide lamp—although he no longer required specialized illumination equipment; he was, in essence, a paragon of such abilities.
His aspiration rested on his foes' initial assumption that he lacked night vision and was inept at generating light.
In Underground Trier, within the quarry cavern that had once borne witness to Inevitability-linked rituals on several occasions.
Lumian briefly tidied the dank, lightless setting, positioning a blood-infused candle upon the altar stone.
Just as he concluded the sanctification of the ritual silver dagger and readied to cast a spiritual barrier, faint footfalls reached his ears.
The sounds reverberated within the subterranean passage, seemingly not distant from the present mine.
Someone is passing by? Lumian's pulse quickened, his intent fixated on swiftly restoring the area to order and concealing himself.
Yet, as he neared the altar before him and before he could extinguish the carbide lamp, soft footsteps drew close, manifesting at the cave entrance.
Aware that concealment was futile, Lumian promptly swiveled around, one hand nestled in his pocket, his gaze converging on the source of the sound.
A slender man of brownish-black complexion stood there, clutching a carbide lamp. His black hair bore a slight curl, and his eyes held a profound allure. He sported a black seer's cloak reminiscent of those seen in a circus.
Monette... Lumian recognized the figure.
He was an Islander swindler who had duped Charlie and been hoodwinked by the con artists in Salle de Bal Unique.
Monette, too, saw Lumian.
A smirk tugged at the corners of his lips as he greeted with palpable cheer, "What a coincidence."
In tandem with his words, the swindler produced a crystalline monocle, inserting it into his right eye socket.

Chapter 315: Anxious Termiboros

What a coincidence? Lumian knew better than to consider it mere coincidence.

Deep within the expansive underground of Trier, unexpected encounters were not uncommon, given the diverse cast of characters that frequented its depths—quarry police, smugglers, cave adventurers, mineral researchers, wandering university students, members of secret organizations, wanted criminals, mobsters, heretics, and anti-government militants were active here. However, the odds of stumbling upon familiar faces in such a dark domain were almost negligible.

This wasn't like the time he had rescued Jenna—Lumian had doggedly followed the trail.

Monette's presence, monocle affixed, roused Lumian's caution. He mustered a semblance of a smile and replied, "Indeed. What a coincidence."

With one hand casually slipped into his pocket, Lumian played his role, pretending to secure the candles and materials on the stone surface. The intention was to convey that the ritual was complete and he could depart whenever he pleased. There was nothing of value to plunder or destroy.

Monette adjusted his monocle and with a wave of his hand, offered a departing smile.

"See you aboveground."

And just like that, he withdrew, his footsteps fading into the depths.

Lumian was caught off guard.

He's leaving just like that?

Could it really have been a coincidence?

Judging from Monette's familiarity with Underground Trier, it is evident he has traversed these passages countless times. Yet, that level of familiarity should have taught him that barging into a well-lit spot amidst the darkness could easily trigger conflict...

Common sense dictates that a stranger's presence in the quarry cave warrants cautious observation for any approach. The abrupt, nonchalant "appearance" seemed off...

Does he truly possess that much confidence in his prowess?

It can't be just to scare me!

As Lumian's thoughts raced, he shifted his gaze from the cave entrance to the candles and materials neatly arranged on the rocks.

The question arose whether to persist with the boon ritual.

In that instant, the voice of Termiboros reverberated within him:

"You'd best relocate."
Uh... Lumian's senses tingled, catching a note of unease in Termiboros's tone.
It was subtle, almost elusive, making Lumian doubt his judgment.
This was the first time Lumian had perceived emotional fluctuations in this Inevitability angel.
In previous interactions, no matter how much Lumian goaded and prodded, Termiboros merely maintained silence.
And yet, something about this encounter had stirred anxiety and apprehension within the angel!
As his heart quickened, Lumian blurted out, "Is this person truly dangerous?"
"He isn't inherently dangerous, but I sense a looming threat," Termiboros responded.
This confirmed Lumian's guess.
The angel had sensed a looming problem through the strings of fate, a predicament that could jeopardize His very essence.
"Why does a seemingly less formidable individual trigger such unease? What's his motive?" Lumian pressed on.
Termiboros reverted to His usual depth as He intoned, "I'm sealed. I can only perceive the outside world through you, so I lack ample information. To uncover the answers to these queries, the seal must first be weakened."
Do I look like an idiot to you? I even suspect that your anxiety and worry might be fabricated to exert pressure and intimidate... But given Termiboros's previous conduct, even if progress hadn't been made, such overt intentions should not have been revealed so swiftly... Monette's appearance was indeed oddly coincidental, his actions shrouded in inexplicable bizarreness. If possible, I must evade him. It's safer to assume he poses considerable danger rather than underestimate and expose myself... With a brisk pace, Lumian gathered his belongings, clutched the carbide lamp, and exited the quarry cave.
Drawing upon the subterranean map meticulously memorized from Gardner Martin's records, Lumian navigated closer to Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, discreetly delving a few meters below ground level to stumble upon another somber, soundless quarry cave. He incorporated no fewer than three evasive maneuvers along the way to evade potential trackers.
Phew... Exhaling a breath of relief, Lumian surveyed his surroundings and rested his carbide lamp upon the ground. On a moderately level rock, he arranged the candles and ritual components, ensuring their proper alignment.
Abruptly, a flicker of motion in the shadows at the quarry's edge

pricked his senses.
Hiss... Lumian's heart skipped a beat. Clasping the carbide lamp cautiously, he directed its beam toward the source.
A bluish-yellow radiance pierced the obscurity, unveiling a black rat partially concealed by gravel.
The rat made no effort to evade the light; it stood still. After a few heartbeats, it pivoted languidly and vanished into a minuscule crevice at the rock wall's base.
For some reason, Lumian sensed a disproportion between the rat's right and left eyes.
Gripping the carbide lamp, tension once again coursed through Lumian. He hushed, "Temiboros, is there a problem here too?"
Termiboros's voice resonated within Lumian's being, emanating a regal aura.
"It's best if you pray to The Fool immediately for angelic protection before moving elsewhere."
Could the situation be that grave? Lumian's pupils dilated. Swiftly producing an additional candle, he hastily constructed the altar.
Not a shred of concern lingered regarding Termiboros potentially manipulating him into a detrimental choice. After all, supplicating The Fool was Lumian's last resort, and it undeniably served his interests.
From a different vantage, the very fact that circumstances compelled an Inevitability angel to indirectly beseech The Fool's protection implied that something far amiss was afoot. Unleashed, the peril would prove unfathomable!
Being both mentally and physically optimal, Lumian's adept hands fashioned the candles, a process lasting just over ten seconds. He sanctified the dagger and forged a wall of spirituality that enshrouded solely him and the altar.
Methodically, he ignited the three candles sequentially, from deity to humanity, from left to right, punctuating with drops of essential oil and extract.
Amidst the haze and wisps of fog, Lumian exhaled, reciting gravely, "The Fool that doesn't belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck.
"I implore you,
"I implore your protection..."
As the ritual unfolded, Lumian surrendered to the mist's embrace, the prickle of his skin, the lassitude of his mind. Once more, he glimpsed the twelve-winged seraph, pure luminescence descending from infinite heights to envelop him.
As the radiant wings receded and dissolved, Lumian's senses jolted

back to him. Gauging his state, he hastened to pack up the altar items and hastily exited the mine's confines.
Descending beneath the bustling market district, Lumian maintained his vigilant, practiced evasiveness, pushing forward with meticulous attention.
Almost twenty minutes elapsed before Lumian stumbled upon another concealed quarry cave, secured by its discreet location, courtesy of his map.
Stepping inside, he assessed the surroundings. His voice hushed, he inquired, "Temiboros, is there any issue here?"
"Presently, none," Termiboros responded.
Lumian shut his eyes, a newfound calm settling over him.
He mulled over his options.
Should I surface and await the anomaly's dissipation before seeking out a secluded haven for the boon-praying ritual? Or should I seize the moment, briefly escape the abnormality, and hasten my progression to Contractee, capitalizing on The Fool's angelic protection?
In keeping with Lumian's disposition, he leaned towards the risk. The scenario wouldn't change later. He couldn't ascertain if the anomaly had genuinely dissipated. He needed the counsel of someone higher in rank.
In that case, he might as well seek that counsel now!
The altar was reinstated. Yet, this time, he bypassed protection or boons, summoning instead Madam Magician's messenger.
The "doll" messenger, clad in a gown of light gold, coalesced above the flickering candle flame.
Observing Lumian, it grumbled, "This isn't a good place."
With that, it retrieved the hastily inscribed letter from Lumian's hand.
The letter briefly recounted Monette's behavior and Termiboros's response, querying the possibility of initiating the boon prayer ritual at present.
Lumian exercised some cunning here. He didn't outright solicit Madam Magician's protection, merely inquired about feasibility.
Hiring a demigod came at a steep price. Lumian deemed it currently unaffordable. Instead, he aimed to draw her attention by inquiring.
Of course, if push came to shove, he'd consider it. Debts could be repaid. Or if the person was deceased, repayment became moot.
This isn't a good place... Does this pertain to the current quarry cave or the entirety of Underground Trier? Lumian contemplated the messenger's words.
Swiftly, the messenger returned, bearing Madam Magician's

response: "That's a big problem."
Madam Magician's opening remark twitched Lumian's eyelids.
"Of course, the situation isn't dire—at least, I haven't discovered the gravest entity's return to this world yet.
"What we must ascertain is His true intent. Termiboros's reaction implies He's the target, but this individual excels at concealing motives. This may well be a calculated illusion meant to deceive us or another party.
"For the time being and the foreseeable future, anomalies should be absent. Stabilize yourself and proceed with the boon prayer.
His? That's an angel? The entity whose hostility Monette exhibited is an angel? Lumian hissed involuntarily, engulfed by a renewed surge of trepidation.
This brought to mind the uniqueness of Salle de Bal Unique. He suspected that confronting them to reclaim a debt might entangle him with a host of angelic Blessed!
Seeing Madam Magician's assessment align with Termiboros's, Lumian composed himself and reconfigured the altar.
Before long, he focused on the pair of gray-white candles symbolizing Inevitability's power and himself. Amidst the intricate fragrance of gray amber perfume, he retreated slightly and intoned deeply, "Power of Inevitability!
"You are the past, the present, and the future;
"You are the cause, the effect, and the process."

Chapter 316: "Invitation Letter"

In a repetition of events, the silver-black candle flame once again solidified into a beam of light, striking Lumian's left chest, already wracked with agony and turmoil.

Amidst the pervading gray fog and the unsettling black wind, a silvery-black illusionary liquid began to trickle out.

At some elusive point in time, Lumian's pain and vertigo faded into insignificance. He felt as though he had transformed into an entirely different entity.

Standing in the wilderness, he gripped a wooden bow in his hand and released an arrow that gleamed with a blue radiance toward his aerial target.

Lumian vaguely remembered who he was, but he felt that everything was extremely real and he was experiencing it.

The keen, spectral-blue arrow cut through the sky, finding its mark in the belly of a dusky vulture.

An acute agony surged into Lumian's consciousness. He observed himself beating his wings, descending with an arrow lodged perilously close to his abdomen.

No, why have I become a vulture... Amidst the present experience, Lumian maintained a fragment of awareness about his own state and condition.

Bang!

He collided brutally with the ground, each bone fracturing with excruciating force. Agony pierced his core.

Lumian teetered on the brink of unconsciousness as a hyena lunged, its sights set on him.

Warm, repulsively scented flesh filled his mouth. He found himself ravaging the lifeless form of the grayish-black vulture. The bluish-tinged arrowhead had snapped within the avian creature.

This taste is nauseating... I'm no Ludwig, the monstrous child... Lumian's internal complaint resounded.

He didn't completely mistake himself for a hyena, but he continued to bite and devour his prey uncontrollably, not letting go of the poisoned parts.

Abruptly, a searing pain stabbed into his back, and he was thrust onto the ground by razor-sharp claws.

His attacker: an uncanny lion marred by decay, oozing blood-yellow pus from its wounds.

Lumian tore the hyena's throat apart and retreated with it into the nearby underbrush.

As he witnessed the scene through an observer's lens, he systematically dismantled the hyena.

Amidst a mix of satisfaction and revulsion, Lumian's abdomen seethed. His Beyonder powers, teetering on the edge of control, were fully ignited by the venom, resulting in a chaotic anomaly.
His sanity waned, spiraling into insanity. All that remained was an insatiable urge to obliterate the beings before him, to unleash chaos.
No, I mustn't succumb... The paramount objective remains incomplete... Lumian drew in the faint, sweet aroma of gray amber, resisting complete surrender to madness.
In the midst of his cathartic sprint, his attention fixed on a hunter, and he lunged at the figure.
With a wooden bow in his grasp, Lumian caught a whiff of a repugnant odor and sighted a decaying lion, two wart-like growths on its shoulders.
Its mouth, adorned with remnants of vibrant red flesh and blood, stretched to its limit.
A jolt of alarm coursed through Lumian as his full self-awareness returned. He discerned that the hunter's "form" had turned ethereal, akin to the vulture, hyena, and lion, morphing into intricate silver-black words and bizarre symbols.
The words linked with the symbol, weaving a ring that abruptly contracted into his body.
Lumian's eyes opened, and he confronted the flickering silver-black candle flame. A half-meter-tall stone, functioning as an altar, met his gaze.
The encounter felt tangibly authentic... As if I had been the vulture, the hyena, the lion, and another human... Lumian massaged his throbbing head and gradually rose to his feet. Reflecting on his prior experiences, he assimilated the newfound knowledge within his mind.
He couldn't remember when he rolled on the ground in pain.
Phew... Exhaling deeply, Lumian affirmed that he had acquired a fresh boon and transformed into a Contractee.
He swiftly tidied up the altar, dismantled the wall of spirituality, and grabbed the carbide lamp, ready to leave the quarry cave at any moment.
Simultaneously, Lumian assessed his transformation and the Contractee's abilities.
His spirituality had seen a marked increase.
His Dancer flexibility and the Alms Monk's endurance in harsh environments had shown modest improvement, though not substantial.
His intuitive sense for luck had also seen a slight upgrade. However, upon recognizing that Termiboros could sway his fate

and judgment, he refrained from frequently relying on this ability for protection.
Summoning Dance now exerted a broader sphere of influence, and his ability to forcefully possess the bizarre creatures had extended further.
The Contractee status bestowed upon him just a single fresh ability —the power to enter into a contract with a summoned creature, directly borrowing a distinctive characteristic skill.
Contrary to Lumian's anticipations, this unique contract had merged with his body and soul during his advancement. Its transfer to others was impossible.
In essence, he had become an indivisible part of the contract, the most pivotal aspect. In time, he would need to rely on this element to compose the remaining sections of the contract and offer them to the target creature for "signing."
After musing for a time, Lumian had a rudimentary understanding of the specifics of the Contract ability.
The agreement could solely be formed with the consent of the target creature.
Once the contract was sealed, he could handpick the traits he desired, guided by his volition.
With each ratified contract, not only would he acquire a skill, but he'd also assimilate a measure of influence from the contracted being. The higher its rank, the greater the adverse impact.
The count of contracts inked depended on his resilience. Perhaps he could endure just one high-level or exceedingly potent attribute. Several ordinary traits might be borne, keeping pace with his standing. Particularly feeble ones could be pursued more liberally.
Upon signing a contract, a cost was entailed. Part was a tribute to the contracted entity, and the remainder was a tribute to the witness. The cost could encompass life, limbs, kin, loved ones, offerings, one's spirituality maximum, a fraction of reason, and so on. The precise demand hinged on the desires of the contracted creature.
Hence, much of the intelligence Lumian gleaned from this boon concerned the corresponding creature. This encompassed specific abilities and the "compensation" the counterpart sought.
Nevertheless, most of these odd creatures were sinister and uncanny, and the price he'd need to pay was consistent. Lumian didn't wish to select from their ranks.
Of course, this wasn't the prime rationale. Conceivably, these creatures harboring the mystical knowledge interwoven with the power of Inevitability had ties to the entity known as Inevitability. Lumian dreaded that forging a contract with them might covertly

manipulate him, propelling his destiny into the abyss.
Consequently, Lumian had no intention of designating the entity as the object of prayer and witness while entering into a pact.
A superior choice was at hand: Mr. Fool!
According to the sermons in The Fool's cathedral that Lumian had heard, this great entity reigned over the spirit world. The Angel of the Holy Spirit by His throne presided over the spirit world on His behalf.
Even if embellished, this testified to Mr. Fool's considerable sway in the spirit world.
In such a situation, Lumian—marked by The Fool's seal and enlisting The Fool as an intermediary and pact witness—could potentially yield substantial advantages and concealed benefits when attempting to forge a pact with a spirit world creature. It was just like other Contractees signing contracts with strange creatures that came with knowledge.
Lumian promptly sorted through the recently acquired knowledge and discerned that certain aspects remained quite ambiguous, as if they encompassed myriad possibilities.
For instance, the stipulation of obtaining the target creature's consent before signing a contract did not specify the methodology of obtaining consent. Securing agreement through offerings as a bribe constituted consent, but so did beating them into unreserved submission. Similarly, the "compensation" demanded by the latter should be negotiable.
Additionally, the deleterious impacts that the acquired knowledge from contracted creatures brought along, along with the limits of one's endurance, precluded the prospect of Lumian circumventing the system to forge a pact with a high-ranking creature and attaining godlike power at a reasonable price via Mr. Fool's seal, the sovereign of the spirit world.
Nonetheless, the liberty to cherry-pick any amalgamation of skills within a defined spectrum imposed a considerable upper boundary on the potential of a Contractee. Naturally, the floor was equally low. Opting for an ill-suited skill and exacting an erroneous price could render one subpar even in comparison to an elite non-Beyonder individual's aptitudes.
Lumian steadied himself and murmured with a sense of contentment, "Temiboros, do you have anything to add?"
To be candid, Lumian's foremost apprehension upon descending into the underground was whether Termiboros would exploit the boon-seeking ritual to instigate harm. After all, the potency of the boon he was acquiring was escalating, posing a genuine threat to the angel of Inevitability. Even if securely sealed, He would

unearth a method to stir up discord. It was improbable for Him to remain inert, permitting His strength to wane.
Furthermore, during the boon ritual, the seal would inevitably crack slightly, permitting the essence of Inevitability to trickle out. This would afford Termiboros a distinct opportunity.
Initially, Lumian had intended to solicit safeguards before officially beseeching a boon. Unexpectedly, Monette's bizarre appearance and the angel backing him had expedited the need for a blessing. Termiboros had turned more tractable, abstaining from conspicuous interference.
Termiboros's voice resounded with His response, "The mine entrance."
The mine entrance... *What does that imply?* Lumian clutched the carbide lamp and advanced toward the entrance of the quarry cave, mired in bewilderment.
A bluish-yellow luminescence cast light over the debris-strewn expanse, revealing a meticulously trimmed piece of stiff paper.
It wasn't present when I entered... Lumian tensed and cautiously drew closer. On the ebony paper, a monocle had been meticulously drawn, almost replicating reality. Four lines of bold, vibrant red Intisian words graced the page:
"Salle de Bal Unique
"Night of Lovers
"7 p.m. on the last night of every month
"You're invited."
Salle de Bal Unique... Monocle... Night of Lovers... Lumian's thoughts instantly summoned an image of Monette donning a monocle in his right eye socket.
He had earnestly invoked The Fool's angelic safeguard and expended considerable effort to elude detection, yet he had failed to shake off the enigmatic trickster?
No, Mr. Fool's angelic blessing exudes a high-tier anti-divination and anti-prophecy influence. Unless Monette has been lurking in my vicinity without being thrown off, it's implausible for him to regain proximity! Lumian's heart skipped a beat as he instinctively surveyed the surroundings.
Silence reigned within the obscurity bordering the quarry cave. Yet, Lumian's skin prickled, as though an abundance of eyes remained concealed within the air.

Chapter 317: Summoning Target

In the Cordu days, Lumian might have snatched up that invitation and made his way to the Salle de Bal Unique by month's end, all to unleash a prank to return the shock.

However, this time around, Lumian's grip on the mystical world was firmer, a result of his brush with countless otherworldly aberrations. He conjured a flicker with the snap of his fingers, sending forth a crimson spark that alighted on the ebony paper before him.

Amidst the swiftly burgeoning flames, Lumian departed the quarry cavern, his carbide lamp casting its light, guiding him towards the nearest exit of the Underground Trier.

Yet, on this journey, an unshakable paranoia seized him. The moss on the rocky walls, the unseen insects within the shadows, even the intangible entities that traversed the air—it was as if Monette's eyes bore into him from all angles.

It wasn't mere illusion but rather a reality that wound Lumian's mind taut, each heartbeat a gallop of unease.

Termiboros's unwavering quiet provided the lone solace, a lack of agitation hinting that the quandary hadn't escalated—yet.

A quarter-hour's passage led Lumian to ascend the steel stairs, emerging onto solid ground once more.

As sunbeams pierced the sky, penetrating a sea of white clouds and bathing his visage in their glow, he felt as though he'd been reborn.

Phew, no wonder Madam Magician said to live under the sun in Trier as much as possible... Exhaling a sigh, Lumian snuffed the carbide lamp, locked in his bearings, and charted his course back to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Upon reentering the safe house, he immediately summoned Madam Magician's messenger, apprising the holder of the Major Arcana card of the developments that unfolded.

Madam Magician's reply was simple:

"Exemplary work. Steer clear of Salle de Bal Unique.

"The Lord's Angel of Time shall keep vigilant watch over this affair."

Why would Mr. Fool's Angel of Time direct His attention toward Salle de Bal Unique? *Is there indeed an Angel of Time?* The angelic entity whom the charlatans of Salle de Bal Unique revere bears a link to Mr. Fool's Angel of Time. Or perhaps, an animosity? Lumian ruminated, momentarily adrift in the murk of comprehension.

With a measure of relief prevailing, he reclined upon the bed, surrendering himself to sleep's embrace—an interlude wherein his mental fortitude and vitality underwent reinvigoration.

At noon, Lumian ate two savory meat pies and drank a glass of Apple Whiskey Sour. Seated at the table, he engaged in earnest perusal of the bestiary chronicling the spirit world creatures.

As he raced through the pages, a sleek black fountain pen danced in his hand, crafting purposeful circles on the paper to accentuate potential candidates.

After over an hour of intense scrutiny, Lumian distilled a preliminary list of 50 to 60 spirit world entities boasting suitable attributes and modest threat levels. Following the breadcrumbs of indicated page numbers, he retrieved the source manuscripts and embarked on meticulous research.

Intermittent breaks punctuated his reading. As evening painted the sky in hues of twilight, Lumian at last concluded his meticulous perusal of the source materials, now in possession of their profound knowledge. A final selection had been forged.

First in line was the Abscessed Hand. This enigmatic spirit, once shrouded in legend across the southern and central parts of the world, had been conjured by aficionados of mysticism, leaving a trail of lifeless bodies in its wake.

From crime scene accounts, the fallen were strewn across the forest expanse. With the exception of those initially claimed within a hunter's lodge, the remaining deaths occurred nearly simultaneously. This revelation hinted at the Abscessed Hand's swift transitions between victims, throttling one soul and in a heartbeat, lunging towards its next quarry.

Dream divinations unveiled a bluish-black, gangrenous hand, swollen and oozing with putrescence. Its appearance was always abrupt, snapping a victim's neck within two to three seconds before vanishing to assail another, irrespective of the distance.

Based on the hand's traits, Lumian inferred its considerable aptitude for traversing the spirit world.

As for its danger level, Madam Magician's accounts deemed it commonplace, bound by the constraints of the summoning ritual.

Nevertheless, a significant detail stood out from the Major Arcana card holder: "It's suspected to be a fragment of something greater."

Severed hand? Could its kindred comprise severed legs, heads, torsos, and innards? *What would happen when these fragments converge?* If reassembled, what would manifest? Lumian scoured the index in vain, failing to unearth analogous entities. His focus rested on abilities, traits, and threat levels, with little heed to nomenclature.

An alternative theory remained afoot. The remaining Abscessed Hand counterparts might reside within the powerful and dangerous categories, evading the scrutiny of Franca, Jenna, and

the Rabbits of Knowledge.
Should the anticipated spirit world traversal prowess prove elusive, or if the cost demanded an untenable toll, Lumian had an arsenal of alternatives at his disposal.
With regards to disguising abilities, he found a peculiar fondness for a spirit world creature known as the Headless Bride.
This mythical tale was woven within the heart of the Haagenti Kingdom in the Southern Continent. It began with the story of a young girl who dared to elope with her beloved.
In the shadowed chambers of their hidden nuptials, her kin unveiled the shrouded ceremony. Amidst the assembly of family and kin, her own brother exacted a swift, brutal end, severing her head in the name of matrimonial transgression and ancestral decree.
Perhaps this girl was special to begin with, or perhaps she had come into contact with something related to the spirit world during her elopement. Thus, ignited by the agony, fury, and rancor that gripped her before her demise, she imbibed the essence of the spirit world, transmuting into a creature akin to an evil spirit.
Dressed in scarlet bridal raiment adorned with gilded motifs, she hunted and hexed her lineage, subjecting them to an unending torrent of catastrophes spanning three decades, until the tapestry of their lineage was all but erased.
In the present, the Headless Bride prowled the spirit world, shape-shifting with calculated artistry. Its transformations beguiled unwary beings and unsuspecting travelers, drawing them closer to their doom in its relentless embrace.
For a Pyromaniac, this was an easy target with the protection of a ritual.
Headless Bride's alternative was Human-Faced Mantis:
"This is a unique creature from the spirit world. When he was alive, he was a playboy with elegance and good looks.
"As an educator in Sion within the Intis Republic's Hornacis Province, he was embraced by admiration and ardor from both distinguished dames and youthful maidens.
"He was gifted in literature, skilled in poetry, and had numerous lovers.
"This idyllic existence found an abrupt termination when a spurned spouse denounced him to the Church as a Warlock, accusing him of employing sorcery to control his wife.
"Agents dispatched by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church probed into the matter, gathering accounts from a multitude of local men. Astonishingly, their testimonies echoed the allegations in the complaint letter. Strangers to one another, these men's narratives

converged in unsettling symmetry.
"In contrast, the dames and young maidens adamantly attested to their willing involvement, fervently defending the playboy's actions.
"Amid simmering resentment from the local men, the trial raced to a conclusion. The playboy met his end at the stake.
"Upon later investigation, officials confirmed his innocence, unveiling the accusations as a construct of collective envy and enmity.
"It's suggested that an Instigator was behind the scenes.
"In the spirit world, the playboy's essence metamorphosed into a mantis bearing a human visage. Festering within him was an all-consuming loathing, mingling with a mastery over metamorphosis and relentless predation..."
Lumian turned emotional as he read the two pieces of information.
Six years in the countryside had acquainted him with the ignorance that shadowed village life.
From this, he deduced that not all spirit world denizens sprang from nature's womb. Rather, under exceptional circumstances, the souls of departed humans could transmute into enduring spirit creatures. A plausible explanation for hauntings.
Pondering meticulously, Lumian relinquished his aspiration for invisibility and concealment. Instead, he earmarked his final contract slot for traits with direct influence over his Spirit Body.
His choices boiled down to the Thousand-Eyed Evil and the Shadow of Shriek.
These two entities were quintessential 'natives' of the spirit world, venturing forth only in the realms of nightmares and tomes of authentic Warlock craft.
The Thousand-Eyed Evil comprised fleshy forms, exuding a pink ichor, each adorned with an eye bereft of lashes.
Gazing into the ebony pupils of these multitudes, whether human, beast, or mere Spirit Bodies, led to swift slumber.
Their connection to dreams was palpable; they occasionally manifested in the darkest recesses of the most harrowing nightmares.
The Shadow of Shriek, on the other hand, manifested as a confluence of translucent shadows. With frequent outbursts of shrieks, they induced unconsciousness in those who dared to draw near.
Beyond their shrieks, they bore the attributes of ordinary shadows.
Lumian meticulously transcribed all the details concerning the alternative contenders onto fresh paper, folding it as he slipped the

paper into his pocket.
He lingered within the precincts of Salle de Bal Brise for a period, eventually departing from Avenue du Marché around 10 p.m. Navigating the pathways along Rist docks, he ultimately gained entry into the two-story edifice he had once reduced to smoldering ruins.
Though the inferno that had previously ravaged the building had long since been quelled, the structure now stood cloaked in inky darkness and utter desolation.
Recognizing that his intended audience was none other than Mr. Fool, rather than the entity called Inevitability, Lumian had no intentions of executing the summoning ritual underground. This strategic choice was to avoid any potential encounters with the odd and dangerous swindlers of Salle de Bal Unique.
His primary objective was to locate a secluded enclave, far removed from prying eyes. This calculated approach would ensure that even in the event of an unforeseen mishap during the conjuration, should the summoned entity lose control, the collateral damage would be contained, thereby facilitating a swift resolution.
Having meticulously arranged a relatively unscathed chamber ensconced within the obsidian heart of the decrepit building, Lumian proceeded to meticulously arrange the altar.
Relying on the insights gleaned from his role as a Contractee, Lumian diverged from the norm by invoking two additional candles, each symbolizing a deity.
In this ritual, Mr. Fool was both the focal point of supplication and the solemn observer.
With a wall of spirituality set in place and candles aglow, Lumian didn't rush to commence the incantation. Instead, he extracted an iron-gray flask from the inner pocket of his worn brown jacket.
Within this flask, Lumian had ingeniously affixed a slender thread, its counterpart connected to the Decency brooch that lay submerged within a pool of absinthe.
This ingenious design facilitated Lumian's swift and precise retrieval of the Sealed Artifact. No clumsy maneuvering was required; a simple hook of his index finger and the Scotch Broom brooch was within his grasp.
As he tugged at the brooch, a burst of crimson sparks erupted, severing the knot binding the Sealed Artifact.
Without a moment's hesitation, Lumian adorned the resplendent Decency brooch upon his chest.
He harbored the belief that brokering a contract with a denizen of the spirit world carried an inherent cost, akin to a form of bribery.

In this context, Lumian hoped the Decency brooch would assume a role of significance.
Securely fastening the brooch, Lumian's gaze shifted to the trio of candles, silently ablaze before him. Drawing a deep breath, he steeled himself for the upcoming ritual.

Chapter 318: Price

Lumian recited in ancient Hermes, following the precise summoning ritual as described in Aurore's grimoire and the mystical knowledge of Contractees.

"The Fool that doesn't belong to this era;

"You are the ruler above the gray fog;

"You are the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck.

"I beseech your shelter.

"I pray for your attention.

"I!

"In the name of The Fool, I summon:

"A peculiar creature that roams the upper realm, the enigmatic severed hand, the bluish-black throat crusher."

Lumian crafted this summoning incantation based on insights from the Abscessed Hand's data. As the ritual afforded some degree of protection to the subject of the invocation, and since the Abscessed Hand was not deemed perilous, he omitted the terms "weak" and "friendly," infusing it instead with other phrases that would effectively pinpoint the target creature.

The bluish-black candle flames surged, intertwining to shape an ethereal doorway adorned with cryptic symbols. A faint gray mist filled the surroundings, instilling an eerie atmosphere.

Gradually, the door creaked open, and a decaying bluish-black severed hand emerged. It loomed twice the size of Lumian's palm, with the potential to crush a human skull.

The afflicted severed hand hovered before the enigmatic illusory entrance. Its fingers extended toward Lumian's throat, yet it abstained from aggression.

Lumian retrieved a flask of military-grade alcohol, differing in hue, unscrewed the cap, and drizzled a few drops towards the altar where the Abscessed Hand stood.

The liquid struck the ground midway, but with a glint from the Scotch Broom-shaped brooch, the Bribe was discreetly consummated.

Only then did Lumian speak. His voice resonated within his throat and chest as he enunciated alien syllables.

These were words he had never encountered, sourced from the mystical knowledge of Contractees, empowering him to master their pronunciation and essence.

They fell under the Mystical Language of Fate, an integral part of this arcane tongue.

Lumian's vocal resonance coalesced into silvery-black glyphs, akin to symbols, materializing from thin air.

They descended upon the faux goatskin resting on the altar, melding into a brief yet uncanny covenant.
As the pact solidified, Lumian established an intricate connection with the Abscessed Hand, akin to utilizing the Summoning Dance to anchor it to his very being.
Through this conduit, Lumian gleaned the rudimentary abilities and traits of the Abscessed Hand, sensing its yearnings in the process.
These yearnings were the price Lumian had to pay.
"Locate my body, or godhood shall elude you forever!"
An advance payment and a debt to be settled later... *Could this be the unfolding of the Bribe?* No, that's not it. Upon sealing a contract, the price is promptly remitted—manifesting as my inexorable fate of ascending to demigodhood. Once I uncover the remaining segments of the Abscessed Hand, the reward shall naturally replace the price... Presently, it's akin to providing ample collateral... Lumian's musings raced as he gleaned the crux of the pact.
Concurrently, he found the coveted spirit world traversal ability from the Abscessed Hand's attributes and qualities, inclusive of its anti-divination, quasi-invincibility, and the skill to snap the necks of those without godhood.
A trait intrinsic to the Abscessed Hand, not a mere ability. Its effects marginally deviated from Lumian's expectations, yet remained within tolerable thresholds.
With Decency's utilization window limited to fifteen minutes, the cost was bearable, and its attributes neared sufficiency. Lumian squandered no time, summoning the other candidates and vowing in ancient Hermes.
"I shall aid you in finding your body. Until then, godhood shall elude me."
These words fused with the surroundings, morphing into wisps of bluish-black mist that seeped into the faux goatskin parchment.
The Abscessed Hand descended, leaving a tincture of yellow-tinged, sanguineous pus within the contract's vacant space.
Spontaneously, the covenant ignited, yielding myriad silvery-black symbols and words.
They interlinked, configuring an intricate and enigmatic pattern, abruptly condensing onto Lumian's shoulder.
Though concealed beneath his attire, Lumian's psyche conjured an image of his right shoulder.
A curious black seal-like emblem materialized there.
Instinctively, Lumian apprehended that upon activating the contract sigil, he could harness the Abscessed Hand's attributes to

traverse the spirit world. Dissolution of the contract was only conceivable upon the demise of either party—a destiny preordained.
Without bothering to experiment with spirit world traversal, Lumian terminated the summoning and embarked on a fresh ritual.
...
"In the name of The Fool, I summon:
"The vengeful spirit that wanders the void, the headless bride in her eternal plight, and the wellspring of a bloodline's malevolence."
Once again, the enigmatic illusory portal manifested, enshrouded in bluish-black flames interweaving. A frigid wind swept forth, transforming the summer night into a wintry chill.
Lumian observed a form materialize from within the illusory entrance. Adorned in a vibrant red festive gown, meticulously threaded with gold, the figure stood before him.
Without question, the figure lacked a head, exuding an aura of deep-seated malice and resentment.
Lumian meticulously followed the prescribed procedure—utilizing the liquor as a "bribe," reciting the contractual pledge. He discerned the price demanded by the Headless Bride.
"Sacrifice a kin or friend."
"Thank you for your presence," Lumian murmured with a sardonic smile, concluding the summoning.
From this seemingly fruitless summoning, he gleaned valuable insights. He confirmed that Bribe wielded a degree of influence.
The original demand from the Headless Bride entailed a kin's sacrifice; however, Bribe had managed to expand the scope to encompass friends.
Lumian's sights next shifted to the Human-Faced Mantis. He had formulated a summoning phrase: "The vindictive spirit that wanders the void, a hunter adopting mantis guise, a shapeshifter adept at donning human semblance."
Amidst a peculiar swooshing sound, an immense, translucent cyan mantis emerged from beyond the illusory door.
Its head bore the visage of youth, handsome and radiant, inadvertently lowering one's guard.
Sensing the summoner's presence and gender, the mantis swiftly transformed into a resplendent woman attired in a black evening gown.
Internally scoffing, Lumian meticulously fulfilled the entire sequence: Bribe, recitation, and perception.
The Human-Faced Mantis delineated three categories of offerings,

requiring solely one to be met: "Contractor's reproductive organs; Contractor's capacity for lying; Contractor's immolation at the stake."
Post-Bribe, the stipulations underwent some relaxation, affording an additional choice or two. This entity seeks but a single thing—human anguish... The first aligns with his malevolence towards men. If I were of the female gender, this option likely wouldn't surface... The second corresponds to slanderers and false accusers, while the third aligns with the stake he himself endured... Lumian swiftly concluded.
As a Pyromaniac, the third demand posed no grave challenge. On one hand, he exhibited formidable resistance to flames, and on the other, enduring agony was his forte.
Were this choice absent, Lumian intended to forfeit and subsequently summon several comparable spirit world beings later. Depriving him of the power to lie would markedly undermine his capabilities, rendering survival in a place like Trier implausible. He also wasn't certain if his reproductive organs would return at 6 a.m. after sacrificing them; he didn't want to take the risk.
Without delay, he found the Niese Face he sought from the arsenal of the Human-Faced Mantis's abilities.
"Niese" had been the name of the Human-Faced Mantis during its living days. The essence of this ability leaned more toward illusion than corporeal transformation. Nevertheless, absent the means to nullify it or godhood, piercing through the illusion remained beyond reach.
This occasion saw the black insignia affix to Lumian's left shoulder, accompanied by surges of crimson flames welling from his feet.
Unperturbed by Lumian's actions, they ignited his attire and charred his flesh.
Sensations reminiscent yet distinct from his encounter with Susanna Mattise enveloped him. An amalgamation of familiar and unfamiliar torment coursed through his consciousness, assailing his senses.
Swiftly forsaking his cherished belongings, Lumian clutched the Decency brooch in his palm.
The conflagration endured for a full three minutes. Lumian's skin charred, his clothes imprinting scorched marks onto his body.
For a Pyromaniac, such wounds posed no mortal peril—they scarcely even qualified as severe. He maintained the vitality to prepare for the ensuing summoning.
"The enigmatic entity that roams the upper realm, a mass of flesh

bedecked with myriad eyes, a participant in the abyssal realms of nightmares."
As the chant resonated, a creature of flesh and sinew rolled forth through the illusory door. Each flesh fragment sported a white eye, its pupil veiled in obsidian.
Clasping the aluminum-white military flask, Lumian's grip faltered, and he abruptly descended into a profound slumber, ensnared by the myriad gazes.
After an indeterminate stretch, he snapped back to consciousness, realization dawning that the ritual had concluded on its own accord. The Thousand-Eyed Evil had retreated to the spirit world, forgoing a genuine assault.
I was lulled to sleep by mere sight. Communication is impossible... Also, this level of influence lies beyond the ritual's inherent protection... Lumian exhaled, seizing the Salle de Bal Brise pocket watch to ascertain the time.
Thankfully, I only slept for a few minutes. There's still about three minutes left... Lumian focused, initiating afresh, summoning forth the Shadow of Shriek.
...
"The spirit that wanders in the void, a confluence of myriad silhouettes, the progenitor of incapacitating shrieks."
Once more, the mysterious illusory entrance swung ajar. Yet, what met Lumian's gaze wasn't an anomalous shadow coiled into a blob, but a nebulous silhouette draped in a pitch-black armor resembling fish scales.
Distinct from all armors documented in newspapers and magazines, this suit bore scales each akin to miniature, writhing shadows.
Hmmm... Could the summoning incantation have been imprecise, yielding a kindred spirit world creature? It seemingly boasts an incapacitating shriek. Let's first gauge the prospects of cementing a pact... Lumian fathomed the situation and embarked upon another cycle of Bribe, utterance, and apprehension.
The armored shadow stipulated an offering: "A blood tribute of ten or more lives or gold amounting to 100,000 verl d'or."
Courtesy of Bribe, the prerequisites exhibited leniency, demanding the sacrifices be rendered within three months. Failing to comply would precipitate contract retribution, a potentiality encompassing control loss or, worse yet, fatality.
A sum of 100,000 verl d'or... Lumian discerned this to be modestly manageable, thereby delving into the ability roster and traits of the armored shadow to locate the coveted incapacitating shriek.
While scouring, he happened upon an ability bearing an intriguing

nomenclature: "Spell of Harrumph."

Chapter 319: "Travel"

The Spell of Harrumph derived its name from a combination of a snort from the nose and a harrumph from the mouth, giving it a distinct quality that Lumian found intriguing.

Moreover, the enigmatic armored shadow, while alive, was believed to be either human or a humanoid intelligent creature. Many of its distinct attributes and abilities had been given their own names. These attributes weren't like the dense individuals who relied on Lumian to simplify and assign labels for their ease of remembrance.

Information channeled through the unique connection revealed to Lumian that the Spell of Harrumph was a spell-like ability capable of affecting a Spirit Body.

Through the dual sounds, it stirred one's consciousness to induce a mystical transformation, generating a unique fluctuation that surged towards its designated target.

Any creature touched by such a fluctuation would experience severe dizziness at a minimum or even a Psychic Piercing assault at its worst, potentially rendering the target unconscious.

This ability would grow in potency as the user advanced in levels. In essence, it possessed the potential to influence divine entities, provided Lumian also ascended to Sequence 4 or temporarily elevated his level in some fashion.

Impressive. It's on par with the incapacitating shriek. Moreover, harrumphing seems more dignified than indiscriminate shouting... Realizing time was of the essence, Lumian made a commitment and formalized the agreement.

He harbored a genuine curiosity about the additional attributes and capabilities of the armored shadow. Their names held a certain uncanny quality, such as the Night Parade of Ten Thousand Demons and the Soul Devouring Scream.

This instance, the seal-like object descended onto Lumian's right chest, marking the conclusion of the ritual.

Swiftly, he secured a thread around the Decency brooch and returned it to the iron-gray military flask. Dismissing the spiritual barrier, he cleared the altar and retrieved the objects he had laid out.

Subsequently, a ghostly light emanated from Lumian's right shoulder, and he abruptly vanished, traversing into a mystical realm drenched in layers of hues and peculiar creatures.

In the subsequent moment, he exited the spirit world, dazed, reappearing in his bedroom on the second story of Salle de Bal Brise.

As Lumian massaged his throbbing head, he surveyed his surroundings and nodded approvingly.

It's indeed true spirit world traversal. This ability is very useful...

The only problem rested in its exorbitant spirituality cost. With Lumian's Contractee and Pyromaniac enhancements, he could only execute it three to four times. Considering the consumption of flames and the contingency allocation for safety measures, he could employ it once or twice in a relatively intense confrontation.

For a pure Contractee, they could merely "teleport" twice as standard procedure, excluding any other expenditure.

Furthermore, this was contingent on selecting a proximate coordinate. Of course, proximity didn't exclusively signify the immediate vicinity.

The spirit world encompassed a realm of mystique and peculiarity. Up, down, left, right, front, back—even time—intermingled there. It intersected with the real world, governed by its distinct chaos. Beyond concepts linked in nature, everything else seemed scattered without deliberate arrangement.

In essence, Trier as a holistic notion held sway. It boasted a corresponding domain in the spirit world, unsullied by fragmentation or dispersal. Nonetheless, its surroundings extended beyond neighboring towns and villages. It might correlate to a river's conceptual presence in the Southern Continent, or manifest as a settlement projection for undersea beings.

Minus precise coordinates, Lumian could solely "teleport" within Trier's immediate ambit. Otherwise, he risked straying into the spirit world's treacherous realm, a hazardous endeavor indeed.

When he had endeavored to traverse the spirit world previously, all of Trier's locations had materialized within his consciousness as unfamiliar coordinates. This granted him the capacity to "teleport" back to Salle de Bal Brise instead of venturing to remote corners of the metropolis.

Concurrently, Lumian faintly perceived the Highlands Kingdom's City of White, Rapus—his former destination. It wasn't overtly distant in the spirit world from Trier, but neither was it nearby. Directly "teleporting" there remained infeasible for Lumian. He needed to ascertain one or two intermediate coordinates between the two locations.

Remarkable. Lumian acknowledged with satisfaction.

Inclusive of limited uses and range, his spirit world traversal from Abscessed Hand perfectly met his expectations.

Lumian proceeded to the full-length mirror. Activating the black mark on his left shoulder, he observed his charred form transition

into that of a middle-aged man, featuring a few strands of silver at his temples. His cheeks were rounded, eyes amber-red, and facial contours dignified. The features were sharp, radiating an approachable aura.
Gardner Martin!
It can replicate one's appearance, physique, and demeanor. Yet actions and mannerisms must stem solely from myself... Lumian evaluated Niese Face's potential.
The transformation had expended a notable degree of spirituality, but its maintenance necessitated but a fraction. He could adopt Gardner Martin's likeness for more than ten hours.
Dispelling Niese Face, Lumian retreated a few paces. Gazing upon the mirror, he opened his mouth.
"Ha!"
In response, his spirit surged into the black mark on his right chest. His Spirit Body quivered, releasing an almost imperceptible yellow light from his mouth.
The radiance penetrated the mirror, traversing the wall, vanishing after a span of nearly ten meters.
Effective solely at close quarters... Consuming less spirituality than spirit world traversal yet surpassing Niese Face in expenditure. Applicable four or five times within combat... Lumian, his body marred by burns, exhaled leisurely. He donned his attire, settled onto the bed, and surrendered to sleep.
Temporarily shelving thoughts of the gold he owed the armored shadow and the commitment to locate Abscessed Hand's body, Lumian had ample time for these matters. Current requisites centered on recuperation and rest, alongside allowing the repugnant aura accompanying the Decency brooch to dissipate.
The next morning.
Lumian, clad in a black felt hat, shirt, sweater, and sturdy jacket, pressed the doorbell of Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Franca greeted him with a downcast countenance, seemingly taken aback by Lumian's outfit.
"Is your sense of temperature playing tricks on you?"
Lumian inquired, "Have you gotten your hands on genuine mummy ashes?"
"Didn't you ask that very question just yesterday?" Franca snapped.
The answer was no.
A smile tugged at Lumian's lips.
"I'll take you to find a real mummy."
"Where?" Franca was puzzled and curious.
Lumian stepped into the room and replied nonchalantly, "The

Southern Continent's Star Highlands."
"How will we get there?" Franca glanced toward the washroom before lowering her voice. "Are you suggesting we bother your Major Arcana card holder?"
"I've merely penned a letter to inquire about a transit junction," Lumian responded with a smile.
"Transit junction..." Franca combined her understanding of the mystical arts and swiftly formulated a hypothesis. "Have you obtained a mystical artifact capable of teleportation?"
Lumian shook his head and elaborated succinctly,"Through my contracted creature."
"What sort of contract yields such extraordinary results?" Franca exclaimed, genuine surprise tinging her words.
She had been wondering over Lumian's haste in filtering contracted creatures. Typically, those amenable to a Sequence 7 contract were fairly commonplace. Moreover, their summoning typically necessitated a ritual, rendering them rather impractical for most confrontations.
Lumian let out a chuckle.
"A unique kind of contract."
"Uh..." Franca studied Lumian carefully, circling around him.
The pants-wearing, shirt-clad Witch cleared her throat and remarked, "Are we considered brothers?"
"Not quite," Lumian answered promptly. "We hold different beliefs!"
Franca lowered her voice again. "Isn't it just superficially Steamed, but actually, it's Mr. Fool?"
Lumian replied piously, "I still maintain some faith in the Eternal Blazing Sun."
After all, he had upheld this faith for nearly six years.
Franca found herself momentarily speechless. After a few seconds, she inquired, "Could we be considered friends?"
"Yes." Lumian now spoke in accordance with his true feelings.
Franca's brows eased.
"Could you teach me that unique contract? Name the price."
She made her request straightforwardly.
Lumian shook his head again.
"I can only employ that contract due to unique circumstances."
"Alright." Franca refrained from pressing further, though a tinge of disappointment lingered.
At that moment, Jenna emerged from the washroom. Lumian asked half-teasingly, "Are you interested in journeying to the Southern Continent?"
"Travel? Why would I want to travel?" Jenna appeared perplexed.
Franca swiftly recounted her need for genuine mummy ashes and

Lumian's method of "teleporting" to the Star Highlands. Ultimately, she queried, "Do you wish to come along and observe?"
Jenna deliberated briefly and responded, "Okay."
She recognized her need for greater experience in the realm of Beyonder powers, a necessity for observation, learning, and training.
Furthermore, her maximum geographical range had been confined to Trier's Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra. For a while, she had been captivated by tales of the Southern Continent circulating in the taverns and dance halls.
Lumian assessed his two companions and offered a gentle reminder with a smile, "I'd advise you to don thicker garments. The altitude is considerable, and it's currently winter there."
"Oh..." Franca looked at Lumian and understood why he had bundled up for winter.
Before long, Franca changed into a black coat resembling leather armor and donned dark knee-length pants with plush interiors, adopting the guise of a female mercenary or bounty hunter. Jenna hadn't yet transported her thick clothes, thus she borrowed Franca's clothing. Though their appearances matched, Jenna was shorter, necessitating a tightened belt, secured sleeves, and rolled-up pant legs to prevent impeded mobility.
Lumian reached out and grabbed their shoulders, activating the contract mark on his right shoulder.
A spectral light danced along the seams of his clothing, enveloping Jenna and Franca in a surreal realm, awash with vibrant overlapping hues and enigmatic creatures retreating in every direction.
In an instant, they departed the spirit world, materializing on a desolate island.
Before Jenna and Franca could fully adjust, Lumian initiated spirit world traversal once more.
Upon their return to reality, the Assassins found themselves facing a distant snow-clad mountain peak and an adjacent foreign city dominated by a white edifice.
Jenna soon regained her composure and involuntarily exclaimed, "How magical..."
If she were compelled to encapsulate the magic and articulate her sentiments, a choice of expletives might have been used.
Although not certain if this location was indeed the Southern Continent's Star Highlands, the fact that she could translocate swiftly from Rue des Blouses Blanches to this wilderness underscored the mystical potential of teleportation!
Lumian endured the pulsing headache and the substantial drain

on his spiritual energy as he pointed toward the City of White, seemingly unperturbed.
"Proceed inside."

Chapter 320: Mummy

Franca and Jenna couldn't tear their eyes away from the grazing herd of cows, sheep, and horses. The swarthy men donned felt hats and thick blue or red robes, while the local women flaunted their colorful, multi-layered gowns. Numerous white buildings and shops peddling leather products dotted the scene. It was a captivating and unfamiliar sight.

Franca stepped aside as a wooden carriage, drawn by a long-haired bull, trundled by in the biting wind. She glanced at Lumian and Jenna before speaking up.

"Why the silence? Let's engage with the locals."

After all, what was the point of wandering without interacting?

Lumian fell momentarily quiet before responding, "I lack sufficient information."

Jenna felt a pang of embarrassment. "I don't know enough either."

All she was acquainted with were tales of romantic exploits featuring Pharaoh queens and adventurers unearthing treasures within rainforests.

"Uh..." Franca gestured dismissively with her right hand. "I'm not much better."

How much is not much? Lumian didn't pry further. He ushered his companions into a shop named Highland Mystic Potion.

The proprietor, Sallent Empaya, an Intisian dressed in a blue coat adorned with gold accents, recognized Lumian right away. After all, his distinctive hair color and appearance set him apart. Moreover, only a few days had passed since their last encounter.

Sallent assessed Franca and Jenna, extending a warm smile to Lumian. "What brings you here this time?"

Lumian, struggling with a headache from expending too much spirituality, got straight to the point. "Real mummy's ashes. I want to see the mummy!"

Sallent's eyes flickered briefly, but he refrained from probing. "Very well, I'll show you."

Being a seasoned purveyor of mummy ashes, he knew these products didn't bestow virility; they were combined with genuinely efficacious medicine before hitting the shelves. However, since the clients didn't inquire about the practicality of real mummy ashes, he saw no need to divulge that information.

Furthermore, he suspected Lumian and the two women intended to purchase a mummy for resale and profit. This was a substantial transaction.

Sallent temporarily closed his shop and guided Lumian, Franca, and Jenna to the rear warehouse, where ordinary herbs were

stored. They descended a narrow staircase, reaching the basement door.
Turning to face Lumian and the others, he sought confirmation. "Do you really want to see it?"
It wasn't so much a guilty conscience as a cautionary note.
"Absolutely," Lumian responded without a moment's hesitation.
In the midst of his words, his gaze fixated on the basement's pitch-black wooden door.
It bore a mystical symbol, its form a distortion of dark-green and pale-white hues.
Within, a mix of rudimentary skulls, intertwined arms and vines, and inverted triangles melded to create an enigmatic pattern.
Threads of the same hues radiated outward from these symbols, infiltrating walls, floor, and ceiling alike.
Sallent brought forth a golden key, advancing toward the door.
Franca's voice dipped to a hush as she addressed Lumian and Jenna. "Those arcane symbols appear rooted in the domain of Death."
Jenna furrowed her brow. "What significance do they hold?"
Franca's head shook gently as she replied, "I'm uncertain. Generally, these would play a pivotal role in ritualistic magic. Yet, without a wellspring of power, such magic can falter.
"As I understand, the cathedrals of orthodox Churches feature akin arrangements. The devout believers who pray daily lend their spirits and spirituality to sustain the ritualistic magic. While individual contributions may seem modest, their accumulation wields ample strength."
"Perhaps this location holds the power necessary for sustaining ritualistic magic." Lumian grinned at Franca. "You might have a reason to rejoice. This perspective heightens the likelihood of finding a genuine mummy."
A relieved sigh escaped Franca's lips. "Hopefully, counterfeits aren't as rampant here as in Trier."
Perplexed, she inquired, "But why the need to bring us here to see a real mummy? My divination could discern the authenticity of the ashes."
"To broaden your horizons," Lumian replied confidently.
Before Franca could curse, he added, "Directly requesting mummy's ashes might tempt him to provide counterfeits. When your divination results manifest on the spot, should I then smash his cabinet or engage in a scuffle? Such violence is hardly ideal."
Lumian drew on an adage often uttered by Aurore.
Of course, he left out the adverse effects of the three contracts. The Abscessed Hand stoked a yearning to snap a target's neck. The

Human-Faced Mantis fueled a heightened disdain for those who unjustly maligned the innocent. The armored shadow goaded him to break free from the shackles of life's confines.
Perhaps Mr. Fool's witness or the boon of Bribe rendered these effects relatively manageable. They were detriments he could subdue with focus, yet their collective might occasionally sparked such impulses.
Simultaneously, Franca and Jenna scoffed, unified in their disdain.
Only Hunters harbored an affection for violence!
At that juncture, after a brief struggle with the lock, Sallent triumphantly swung open the pitch-black wooden door, its surface adorned with a cryptic symbol.
Within the basement passageway, Lumian's eyes landed on wall-embedded oil lamps, forever alight.
Drenched in the dancing hues of dark-green firelight, Franca and her companions trailed behind Sallent, the shopkeeper of concealed curatives, as they ventured into the corridor that lay beyond the portal.
Light permeated the space, yet an illusion of advancing into darkness seized them step by step.
The already cold atmosphere seemed to plummet several degrees Celsius lower.
Sallent proceeded seven to eight meters ahead, navigating past firmly shut grayish-white stone doors. He halted before a chamber positioned at the corridor's midpoint.
These stone doors and the encompassing walls bore symbols akin to those at the basement entrance.
Sallent nudged open the stone door confronting him, unveiling a diminutive sepulcher to Lumian and his comrades.
In the chamber's heart rested an exotic humanoid sarcophagus adorned with a golden base and a kaleidoscope of colors.
"This mummy hails from five centuries ago," Sallent introduced, drawing near the stone casket and pressing down its lid.
"He seems rather unconcerned about us making off with the mummy..." Lumian mused under his breath.
Franca emitted a soft chuckle, her voice hushed. "Perhaps he simply thinks nothing of us."
Jenna remained silent during their exchange, her curiosity and trepidation fixated on the innards of the golden sarcophagus.
Within, a corpse swathed in yellowish-brown fabric lay. Its lips were slightly parted, while faint voids marked the spots where eyes once resided. Hints of seeped oil stained its form.
Unrestrained by the foreign surroundings, Franca extracted a

mirror and initiated a divination before Sallent's presence.
His eyes flickered momentarily, swiftly reverting to their prior state, as if he'd encountered such phenomena too frequently.
Before long, an aged voice resonated from Franca's mirror, its cadence accompanied by the gentle rush of water.
"A bona fide mummy, albeit not ancient in origin."
Franca's gaze snapped up at Sallent, the proprietor of the mystic potion store.
Sallent offered an awkward smile in return.
"I fibbed earlier. This mummy isn't a relic from five centuries past. Truth be told, it was crafted just a fortnight ago and dispatched here. However, regardless of origin, it underwent a comprehensive and protracted mummification process. The sole disparity from ancient mummies is the brevity of its interment."
An "ancient" mummy born a mere fortnight prior? Lumian quirked an eyebrow at Sallent, his tone casual. "Do you hunt down the living to fashion mummies?"
Sallent gently shook his head.
"No need for such methods. The Southern Continent witnesses countless daily deaths. Procuring fresh cadavers requires only a nominal fee. Hiring hunters to track and capture would entail far greater expenses. Undertaking the task personally would exact an exorbitant temporal toll."
He involuntarily assessed the advantages and drawbacks of multiple strategies.
Post this explanation, Jenna regarded the mummy with a newfound perspective.
It was the body of someone who hadn't long been dead.
His motionless form stood exhibited as a tradable commodity.
Though the two-week-old mummy served its purpose and met the requisites, Franca yearned for superior specimens.
With a sigh, she averted her gaze from the recently minted mummy, prompting Sallent with a question. "Are there older mummies available?"
Sallent hesitated momentarily before treading cautiously. "How about those from last year?"
This constituted the most "ancient" mummy within the basement.
Franca emitted a rueful sigh. "That works too."
Less enthused, Sallent led the trio to another sepulcher.
Initially presuming Lumian and his companions intended to purchase an entire mummy, Sallent had showcased the most well-preserved specimen. Now, it seemed Lumian merely sought a segment.
The yellowish-brown mummy dating back to the prior year

already displayed signs of fragmentation. Not only were lower extremities absent, but its chest and abdomen also sported gaping voids.
With Franca's divination validating its authenticity, Sallent posed his inquiry with diminished enthusiasm. "How much do you require?"
"50 grams," Franca responded, intending to amass a larger reserve.
Sallent mulled over the request before pronouncing, "500 verl d'or."
Promptly, Franca remitted the payment, her eyes fixed as Sallent procured a hammer and dirk, employing them to sever a portion of the mummy's arm, akin to extracting ore.
Jenna stood dumbfounded. To her, it seemed somewhat gruesome and brutal.
Though she'd witnessed mob fights and personally taken a life, she'd never encountered someone treating human remains as inexpensive commodities.
Internally, Franca sighed and suppressed her emotions.
This was the stark reality of the Beyonder world and its potion system, yet compared to the boons, it was strangely appealing.
With the fraction of a mummy's arm now in her possession, Franca wordlessly led Jenna out of the tomb, trailed by Lumian and Sallent.
They had traversed scarcely three meters when the kerosene lamps lining the corridor receded, casting an eerie dimness.
Sallent swiveled his head, his demeanor a mix of surprise and uncertainty.

Chapter 321: Compensation

In the dim corridor, despite the unchanging temperature, an icy gust swept through, sending shivers down the spine.

Lumian, who had cleared his mind to restore his spirituality, snapped back into attention. He examined the tombs on both sides, his demeanor unaffected by the sudden disturbance.

His initial urge was to reach into his pocket and grasp Mr. K's finger. Yet, he held back, mindful of the unfamiliar territory that was the Southern Continent. Mr. K might not sense the use of his finger, so Lumian suppressed his instinct.

Franca reacted swiftly too. A small mirror materialized in her palm. Jenna, less experienced, didn't grasp the scene's significance, but her instincts told her it wasn't a positive development.

It was akin to the spooky tales told in bar dance halls to frighten young girls!

Sallent, avoiding the dim oil lamp's gaze, briskly moved past Jenna and Franca, making a beeline for the pitch-black wooden door to the basement. He paid Lumian no attention.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Sounds of impact echoed from the tombs on either side. It wasn't clear if sarcophagus lids had been struck or heavy stone doors pounded.

Sallent's expression shifted, and he bolted out.

In the silent basement, the echoes of the pounding lingered. Lumian and the others hurried after the mystic potion store owner, easily overtaking him.

At that very moment, the pitch-black wooden door creaked shut abruptly.

Seeing this, Franca sprinted forward and flung the mirror out the door.

A resonant crack marked the mirror's collision with the wooden door, fragments scattering across the floor.

Lumian and Franca came to a halt simultaneously, their attention on Sallent. Jenna, still in motion, comprehended and made the same choice.

In the eerily dim corridor, Sallent, decked in a blue coat with gold accents, stood frozen, his pale face tinged with a sickly green hue.

The pounding from the tombs persisted, its reverberations shaking everyone present to the core.

Sallent trembled visibly, muttering to himself, "We're done for. We're all finished..."

Franca inquired swiftly yet composedly, "What's going on?"

Only by grasping the core issue could she devise a swift and effective strategy!
Seemingly detached from his own senses, Sallent didn't answer. He half-mumbled, "We're done for. We're all finished..."
Before he could complete his thought, the entire basement quivered.
The dark-green flames that had shrunk to the size of rice grains flickered noticeably in the same direction.
Fear warped Sallent's features, his voice unconsciously amplified.
"It's awake! It's awake!"
"Who is it?" Jenna found it more spine-chilling than any ghost story she'd encountered, but she pushed herself to ask.
Sallent remained unresponsive, repeating his panicked cry, "It's awake! It's awake!"
Seeing that the mystic potion store owner was clearly in a state of extreme horror and not in his right mind, Franca decisively abandoned her attempts to ask him for information and took out a mirror.
Her plan was to use Magic Mirror Divination to swiftly assess the current situation.
Even if the divination's response wasn't crystal clear and required interpretation, it was still better than being completely clueless!
In a matter of moments, Franca completed the incantation and witnessed an aqueous light emanating from the mirror.
Just as she was preparing to gather her thoughts and formulate appropriate questions to obtain corresponding answers, Lumian, who had been standing silently beside her, suddenly spoke up. "Did it work?"
"It did. I can perform the divination," Franca cooperatively responded, although she was puzzled by Lumian's actions.
Lumian immediately broke into a grin.
"No need for questions."
Uh... Franca was caught off guard before she grasped Lumian's intention.
Just then, the basement shook once more. Sallent, the mystic potion store owner, was so overcome with fear that his voice turned high-pitched.
"It's here! It's here!
"We're going to die!"
In the next heartbeat, Lumian seized his shoulder.
Simultaneously, Lumian firmly held Jenna's arm with his other hand, while Franca hooked her arm around his shoulder like a bro.
An eerie light shimmered through the crevices of their clothing,

and the four of them materialized outside the basement, standing before the pitch-black wooden door adorned with intricate and enigmatic symbols.
"It's here! It's here!
"We're going to die!"
Sallent's cries of despair still echoed in the air.
Lumian cast an appraising glance at the mystic potion store owner, pondering whether to utilize the Niese Face to transform into a mummy and give him a scare.
Therapeutic provocation had its merits too!
However, considering his waning spirituality and the prudence of revealing too many abilities to a stranger, Lumian ultimately shelved the prank idea.
Smack!
Jenna swung her right palm, delivering a resounding slap to Sallent's face, leaving him bewildered. He gazed at the woman before him, utterly perplexed.
Franca and Lumian exchanged speechless glances, unsure how to react to this unexpected turn of events.
As the pitch-black door and the basement walls swayed gently, the cacophony outside abruptly subsided.
Jenna felt the weight of their gazes and mumbled, "Isn't this how they wake them up? That's how they would bring back my neighbor when she lost control of her emotions."
It wasn't madness. In the factory district, people had their own practical remedies. More often than not, they did the trick, though occasionally they proved ineffective.
Of course, if he were part of her family, she wouldn't dare try it. She'd seek professional assistance instead.
Franca snapped out of her reverie and commended sincerely, "Well done."
Several moments elapsed, and Sallent's gaze cleared.
Instinctively, he scanned their surroundings and exclaimed in surprise, "We're outside? When did we get out?"
"When you were screaming 'we're going to die,' 'we're going to die,'" Lumian retorted with an annoying tone.
He then raised an eyebrow and inquired with a deep intonation, "Who were you saying was about to wake up?"
Sallent's expression shifted multiple times before he stammered, "A genuine ancient mummy. It slumbers deep within the tomb and occasionally stirs. It only woke up a few days ago. Why did it wake up so quickly..."
Normally, there was a rough timeframe for how long the mummy remained "awake." According to Sallent's experience, it would be at

least another month before it awoke again. That was why he dared to bring Lumian and the others into the basement.
Unexpectedly, an accident occurred!
What caused the ancient mummy to awaken prematurely? Lumian directed a thoughtful gaze at Franca, as if silently asking her if she wished to consider obtaining the genuine ancient mummy.
Franca comprehended his inquiry and shook her head, indicating that it wasn't necessary.
The mummy's ashes were merely supplementary ingredients. The ones formed the year before were still usable. There was no need to risk dealing with what seemed to be a perilous entity.
Lumian withdrew his gaze and pushed through the headache gnawing at his temples. He turned to Sallent and grinned.
"I don't care if it's last year's mummy or an ancient one awakening. There are two things I know for sure.
"First, I saved your life. Second, we were scared out of our wits and nearly met our end down there.
"So, you owe me a thank-you present and compensation for the mental strain. How much do you think is fair? Keep in mind, I only want gold."
With the memory of owing the Armored Shadow and Mr. Fool a total of 100,000 verl d'or in gold, Lumian was keen on seizing every opportunity to amass funds.
As the tumult behind the pitch-black wooden door gradually settled, Sallent heaved a sigh of relief and responded, "How about 1,000 verl d'or? That's all the gold I have on hand."
His heart ached at the thought of parting with the money, but he acknowledged Lumian's point. Without their intervention, he'd have met his end in that basement, becoming fodder for the mummy.
Moreover, the group had demonstrated significant prowess. Rejecting their request outright seemed like a risky proposition.
"Agreed." Lumian didn't push for more or attempt to haggle.
As the quartet made their way toward the stairs leading to the warehouse, Franca lowered her left hand and surreptitiously let something slip into the shadowy corner.
After obtaining 1,000 verl d'or in gold coins, gold nuggets, and jewelry, Lumian, Franca, and Jenna exited the Highland Mystic Potion Shop.
Franca glanced back at the shop and let out a wry chuckle. "Tsk, all this trouble, and we ended up with a mummy's hand and an additional 500 verl d'or."
Without waiting for Lumian's response, she queried with a grin, "Are you running short on funds again? You used to save people

without expecting payment. They could give it or not."
"Have you switched to the Spectator's Pathway?" Lumian teased, nodding in agreement. "The special contract I mentioned involves sacrificing 100,000 verl d'or worth of gold within a set timeframe after the pact is made."
100,000 verl d'or? Jenna's understanding of monetary matters had undergone quite a transformation since entering the world of mysticism.
Based on what she knew, even someone like Ciel didn't possess as much liquid wealth as her. Yet, he dared to accumulate a debt of 100,000 verl d'or just for a contract granting access to those special abilities.
Franca clicked her tongue and inquired, "Why didn't you 'teleport' us right to the door from the start? The basement door wasn't closed then, so no mishaps would have occurred."
"Don't you think it's more dramatic to do it at the last moment?" Lumian retorted with a question.
Naturally, the actual reason was that he had recently gained the ability to traverse the spirit world and hadn't ingrained a reflex to use it. When the pitch-black wooden door in the basement shut, he had been hesitant to attempt teleporting for fear of it failing.
Later, Franca successfully completed her Magic Mirror Divination. Through it, Lumian confirmed his ability to remain connected to the outside world within the seal, which allowed him to make the definitive teleportation.
Amid Franca and Jenna's baffled expressions, Lumian massaged his aching head and announced, "Let's find an inn. I need to rest and restore my spirituality."
"Okay." Franca wasn't in a hurry to secure an inn. Instead, she turned into an empty alley and produced an ornate makeup mirror.
"Why are you using divination?" Jenna queried inquisitively.
Franca's lips curled into a smile.
"I'm using it to divine the reflection in my other mirror."
Seeing Jenna's perplexity, she elucidated, "I left a small mirror that looks like a shard outside that basement."
With that, Franca caressed the mirror and chanted an incantation.
Before long, the mirror projected an image: Sallent, the mystic potion store proprietor, stood before the pitch-black wooden door, his posture hunched as he cried out, "Only death endures forever!"

Chapter 322: Pleasure

"Only death endures forever?"

Lumian and Jenna struggled to grasp the gravity of the situation unfolding before them. Their attention turned towards Franca.

Franca observed as Sallent bowed and offered his prayers before departing from the dimly lit basement. The mirror's enigmatic display dissolved into darkness, marking the end of the divination. She spoke contemplatively, "He seems to be from the Numinous Episcopate."

Numinous Episcopate? Lumian, who had encountered references to this secret organization within Aurore's grimoires, knew that it originated from the royal lineage of the Balam Empire on the Southern Continent and ancient Death believers. The organization's mission seemed to involve awakening or reviving Death while expelling colonists to restore the Balam Empire to its former glory.

Aurore's knowledge of the Numinous Episcopate was somewhat superficial, lacking details about prominent figures, rituals, or specific practices.

"The Numinous Episcopate?" Jenna's lack of familiarity was apparent in her voice.

Franca proceeded to provide a succinct overview of the Numinous Episcopate's background, aligning with Lumian's understanding.

She concluded, "In the Southern Continent, the Numinous Episcopate holds a comparable status to the Rose School of Thought. Although they don't resort to blood sacrifices or terrorism like some secret faith-based organizations, rituals are inherent to their nature. The Numinous Episcopate's pursuit of death's revival necessitates sacrificial rites."

"Right, the Numinous Episcopate's leader is a demigod nicknamed Pale Empress."

Pale Empress? Given the Numinous Episcopate's similarity in strength to the Rose School of Thought, it's plausible that Pale Empress is an angel... Lumian rubbed his head, lacking the energy to analyze further.

Jenna's gaze shifted toward the Highland Mystic Potion shop, her confusion evident.

"Why would the shop owner, an Intisian, join the Numinous Episcopate?"

The Numinous Episcopate's goal was to eradicate colonists and rebuild the Balam Empire. Intis was one of the colonial powers established in West Balam.

Sallent, though having lived in the Southern Continent for over a

decade and reaping the rewards of being an Intisian, found himself in a puzzling predicament. His allegiance to the Numinous Episcopate, despite these benefits, raised questions. Sallent wasn't one of the lowest-class denizens of Trier like Jenna who didn't have a clear concept of colonial interests.

Franca muttered, "Who knows? Numerous possibilities exist. Enforced conversion after being captured, manipulation by mysterious forces, gradual enticement with escalating benefits leading to devout belief, or a transformative experience thanks to being rescued by a kind Death believer.

"In any case, the Numinous Episcopate displays cunning by employing a genuine Northern Continent native to operate a mystical potion shop, peddle mummies, and act as an inconspicuous spy. Their strategy appears well-orchestrated, defying easy suspicion."

Observing Lumian's weariness, Franca decided to not delve further. She located a nearby inn and secured lodgings for them.

Upon Lumian's awakening, sunlight streamed through the glass window, casting a warm glow on Franca and Jenna, who were seated at the table. The sky was serene, adorned with fluffy clouds resembling wisps of cotton.

Franca and Jenna savored a burrito seasoned with spices, enveloping succulent beef and mutton, while Lumian indulged in a plate of roasted onions, potatoes, corn, and assorted meats. A sweet corn-based beverage graced their table, emanating a delightful aroma.

As Lumian sat up, a chuckle escaped his lips. "Looks like you two had quite the time."

Munching on her food, Franca mumbled, "I don't often venture to the Star Highlands, and I accomplished what I set out to do. Naturally, it's time to unwind.

"What's this called? It's called... Dammit, forget it. You get the idea!"

Despite a prolonged attempt, Franca struggled to articulate her thoughts in the appropriate language. Eventually, she abandoned the effort, prioritizing her meal.

Jenna gestured to her right. "We brought you some lunch."

A strip of fried beef, coated with a crimson sauce exuding a subtle alcoholic aroma, lay before Lumian.

"I figured you might be hesitant to venture out due to the language barrier," Lumian admitted, promptly satisfying his hunger.

He had previously realized that only a minority of the locals understood Intisian, and even then, only on a basic level for rudimentary communication.

Franca, swallowing a bite of burrito, sipped on a cup of steaming

corn juice.
"Body language is universal."
Jenna added with a grin, "Franca's gestures are truly something to behold. She even mimics pig squeals, cow moos, and sheep bleats to communicate her meat preferences to vendors unfamiliar with Intisian. Yet, the nobles here are a departure from my expectations. They appear more akin to Northern Continent counterparts than their Southern Continent peers."
In this relaxed ambiance, the trio enjoyed a leisurely lunch, recounting their escapades as if they were on an authentic holiday.
...
Under the cover of night, within the Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman district, nestled at Rist docks, an abandoned building stood—a site Lumian had previously set ablaze.
Cognizant of the potential disturbances that advancements within an apartment might trigger among nearby residents, Franca heeded Lumian's advice and selected this vacant location.
Promptly erecting a wall of spirituality, Franca collected the ashes of the incinerated mummy—thanks to Lumian—along with the other requisite ingredients.
Meanwhile, Lumian and Jenna maintained a careful distance, intently observing as Franca adroitly mixed the ingredients and consumed the potion.
A brief hush enveloped the scene, then Franca's visage twisted in anguish.
Almost instantly, her flaxen hair, formerly bound in a ponytail, broke free of its constraints. Propelled by an invisible force, the hair drifted and extended, resembling a radiant web expanding in all directions.
More ethereal strands emerged, dense and elongated. Swiftly, they populated the space embraced by the wall of spirituality, fashioning a spectral woodland of filaments.
Once again, Jenna bore witness to the mystifying and surreal attributes of the potion,
while obscured by the burgeoning hair. Alongside Lumian, she patiently awaited the anomaly to subside.
Whether this passage of time spanned dozens of seconds or stretched beyond two minutes, the ethereal flaxen hair finally withdrew, returning to Franca's form.
With a jubilant countenance, Franca pivoted to face her companions, her limpid eyes radiating contentment.
"Everything went quite seamlessly. I'm anticipating future advancements to be quite cumbersome and challenging."

Curiously, Jenna found Franca's flowery blouse and off-white breeches harmonizing impeccably with her demeanor for the first time. The attire seemed to accentuate an ineffable allure, evoking a blush and a warmth in Jenna's ears, despite her own femininity. On the other hand, Lumian experienced an unfamiliar and unwanted warmth and reaction.
As Franca acclimated to the powers of the Demoness of Pleasure, Lumian and Jenna's racing hearts eventually steadied, restoring a semblance of normality.
Concluding their task and dismantling the spiritual barrier, Franca rejoined them, sporting a radiant smile. Her eyes shimmered akin to a lake glinting with reflected light.
"How much of an improvement are we talking about?" Lumian posed a direct question.
A rough comprehension of the situation would facilitate better teamwork!
Franca's eyes danced playfully as she responded, a grin adorning her face. "Take a guess."
"I'm not a Demoness. How can I guess?" Lumian's retort barely left his lips before he frowned.
An intangible force had coiled around his legs and body!
Then, with a sudden rush, Lumian's form was engulfed in crimson flames that erupted from within him, engulfing the enigmatic threads.
Only now did Lumian and Jenna perceive the intangible tendrils, tinted in fiery hues resembling translucent spider silk.
Amidst her amusement, Franca inquired of Lumian and Jenna with a mischievous glint, "Do you understand now? Perhaps you'd like to explore another?"
"No!"
"No need."
In unison, Jenna and Lumian retorted, their voices echoing their apprehension.
Franca maintained her smile, suggesting, "Are you truly certain you don't wish to give it a try? I assure you, a mere touch can envelop you in true pleasure."
"Dammit!" Jenna instinctively retreated a step, her expletive punctuating her reaction.
Lumian regarded Franca, grappling with whether she was indeed teasing him or harboring some genuine intent.
Yes, the target should be Jenna... I can't rule out the possibility of using simple contact to embarrass me... As Lumian's thoughts raced, Franca suddenly composed herself and said seriously, "In addition to the two I mentioned earlier, my proficiency in Black

Fire, Frost, Curse, and Mirror magic has all been elevated. Their integration has expanded as well. For instance, I can utilize a mirror to focus on a target and employ Black Fire to enact a curse. Another scenario involves my utilization of Mirror Substitution and Staff Substitution to counteract fatal harm while gaining some measure of recuperation.
"My capabilities as an Assassin and Instigator have also been enhanced."
She succinctly summarized her advancements without delving into particulars.
Lumian nodded, mulling over Franca's capabilities. He inquired thoughtfully, "Do you possess a charm-like ability too?"
Franca's smile hinted at an answer, but she chose to remain silent.
Jenna observed Franca for a moment and then noted something else, pointing at her and remarking, "You've become even more beautiful!"
Franca's individual features and overall appearance had transcended any imperfections. Her demeanor radiated an undeniable brilliance—a striking, flamboyant beauty that demanded no disguise.
"Is that so?" Franca responded, her surprise evident.
Lumian couldn't resist stroking his chin, pondering whether Madame Hidden Blade would genuinely switch to Iron-blooded Knight when going from Sequence 5 to Sequence 4.
As Lumian bade Franca and Jenna farewell and embarked on his return to Auberge du Coq Doré, a sudden realization swept over him. He lowered his voice and inquired, "Temiboros, what's the next boon after Contractee?"
Yet, Termiboros remained silent, offering no reply.
Lumian let out a scoff.
"It's fine. Once I locate the padre, he'll divulge the information."
Although his confidence might waver internally, maintaining an outward appearance of assurance was essential in times like these.
...
The day of the prophesied event arrived swiftly.
In Quartier de la Princesse Rouge, at the crossroads of Rue de la Muraille and Rue du Cheval Blanc, Lumian disembarked from a public carriage with a casual grace. Clad in a white shirt, a black vest, brown trousers, and sleek leather shoes, he cast his gaze upon the slumbering neighborhood that lay ahead.

Chapter 323: Psychological Profile

Lumian stood at an intersection, his hands casually tucked into his pockets as he strolled leisurely toward Rue de la Muraille.

This street held more significance to the people of Trier than even the renowned Avenue du Boulevard. It was their aspiration.

In the days before Emperor Roselle ignited the Industrial Revolution, Trier's cityscape hadn't sprawled to the extent it had now. It nestled in the easternmost corner, fortified by stout city walls and vigilantly guarded by soldiers. Their military encampment wasn't distant, which prompted the emergence of numerous brothels and prostitutes nearby.

As the sands of time sifted through, Rue de la Muraille garnered its reputation, and Trier's population burgeoned. A modest market burgeoned into a realm of prestige and extravagance that stretched across the Northern and Southern Continents.

Lumian passed beneath the sheltering canopy of Intis parasol trees, his gaze taking in opulent palace-like structures alongside unassuming apartments. They all shared a common trait—windows adorned with frosted glass and the occasional green shutter.

Rue de la Muraille appeared to be rousing from its midday slumber. The road hosted few pedestrians, but each one bore a distinct air. Some dashed by in somber gray-blue work attire, driven by haste, while others donned antiquated finery. They glanced around before slipping into apartment complexes. Cameras slung around necks captured candid moments before these wanderers vanished into ornate edifices. Attempts at projecting an Intisian facade couldn't mask true identities, betrayed by hairlines and exaggerated heights.

Moreover, Lumian's keen eye caught sight of an iron-gray robot, towering at two meters. A steam-spewing outlet adorned its back, accompanied by gears, torsion springs, screws, and bent pipes—a symphony of decorative mechanics.

Perched on the robot's left shoulder, a lavishly dressed man flaunted intricate makeup. His leisurely observation spanned pedestrians, dignitaries shrouded in gold or silver masks, and groggy men stumbling into wakefulness.

Here, the ordinary and elite intertwined in a peculiar harmony.

As Lumian advanced, he methodically surveyed his surroundings, his gaze unrelenting in its pursuit of his target.

In a flash, he spotted Albus approaching from a side alley.

The Iron and Blood Cross Order member, sporting dark-red locks, acknowledged Lumian with a sly grin. He lifted his right hand,

pointed at his own head—provocation in motion.
Under Gardner Martin's directive, Albus was tasked with tracking down Padre Guillaume Bénet. It seemed Albus was insinuating a competition of sorts, pitting Lumian against himself to see who'd uncover the "prey" first.
Beyond Albus, the Iron and Blood Cross Order likely deployed several official or peripheral affiliates. In this, Gardner Martin had kept his promises.
Undeterred by Albus's gesture, Lumian pressed on, deeper into Rue de la Muraille.
Guided by the revelations of Demoness of Pleasure Franca's Magic Mirror Divination, the prophecy's domain narrowed:
Guillaume Bénet's presence was expected on five streets, including Rue de la Muraille and Rue du Cheval Blanc, within the week.
However, Rue de la Muraille's length, its expanse, and the thronging populace created a nebulous landscape for Lumian's quest. Carpet searches and widespread net-casting was virtually impossible. Success hinged on the possibility of enlisting aid from the authorities and mustering an army to seal off this domain, vigilantly guarding every entrance to Underground Trier.
Previously, Lumian could only hope that the Iron and Blood Cross Order, a secret organization teeming with formidable Hunters, boasted superior tracking and manhunt techniques. Or perhaps, Termiboros—an Inevitability angel—might drive them to converge. As long as the distance between Lumian and Guillaume Bénet was moderate, they would "reunite" as though preordained.
However, a new trail had emerged.
This advancement was predominantly the fruit of the mystical knowledge he had acquired as a Contractee!
Within this trove of knowledge lay a menagerie of uncanny creatures, summonable or recruitable, complete with the requisite costs for forging contracts. The compendium detailed the abilities obtainable and the subsequent penalties incurred post-contract.
Merging the exhibition of Guillaume Bénet's contractual capabilities from his memory and dream, Lumian pieced together a fragment of insight:
Summoning Abyss Demon Flowers necessitates a sacrifice of fresh human blood. The downside—an increased desire for coitus.
Invisibility mandates thirteen portions of prepared meat. The downside—an intensified susceptibility to hunger.
Slow Flight sacrifices one's romantic infatuation perpetually. The downside—an urge to show off.
Bone Curse predicates the sacrifice of a living person. The downside—drowsiness.

The Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell exacts no fewer than three human souls. The downside—random bouts of dizziness, numbering four to five daily.
Internal Explosion demands the sacrifice of any Beyonder characteristic. The downside—unrelenting spirituality drain, tantamount to permanent reduction of spirituality capacity.
From the detailed description of the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell, Lumian conjectured that the padre had inadvertently met an additional, covert cost.
That was his name!
The Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell affected the target's Spirit Body by invocating their true name, causing them to experience dizziness and other reactions, amplified by deeper comprehension of the target and employment of verbiage echoing the spirit world.
In contracting with a spirit world entity armed with the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell, Guillaume Bénet inadvertently disclosed his true name. Entities endowed with such powers could wield a person's true name for manifold feats—a potentially profound latent hazard.
This clandestine peril was merely one amid numerous akin enigmas housed within a Contractee's mystic wisdom. Therefore, Lumian opted for an extensive screen of spirit world creatures, personal interaction followed by experimental engagement.
Based upon the known downsides accompanying the contracted abilities, Lumian hatched an educated hypothesis.
After Guillaume Bénet, a man driven by insatiable desires, found his appetite for sex surging, he had definitely sought out women. The prophecy's alignment with Quartier de la Princesse Rouge harmonized with the results unearthed from the Magic Mirror Divination about the five nearby streets.
Furthermore, he found his hunger more voracious than ever, and the act of intimacy left him drained of vigor. Thus, the likelihood was high that he would gravitate towards a brothel that catered to both carnal and culinary needs or invite a woman back home.
Guillaume Bénet was not only a man of fervent desires but also an ambitious soul, thirsting for power. Being confined in the village and before the contractual abilities imbued his life with adverse effects, his lust mirrored an expression of power. Otherwise, it was impossible to explain how his desires sprawled across every woman, an inclination spanning the spectrum between esteemed paramours and those of lesser stature.
To him, appropriating the companions of other men became a testament to his standing, might, and allure.
Stepping onto Trier's soil, a place where his provincial accent drew

disdain from the citizens, he undoubtedly sought vindication, manifesting his claims in his own unique manner.
Fused with his relentless pursuit of strength and his past style, Guillaume Bénet very likely went after sought-after courtesans, stoking the fires of envy amongst the local denizens. He might even spirit one or two of these coveted women away to grace his home.
This comprehensive analysis of the padre's character and psyche wasn't Lumian's solitary undertaking. Rather, it emerged from the expertise of Anthony Reid, a Psychiatrist. Armed with Lumian's intricate portrayal of Guillaume Bénet, Reid painted a psychological canvas, a vivid portrait of this heretic's inner workings.
Thus, two distinct paths unfurled to ensnare his prey. The first entailed staking out upscale brothels, where both meals and famous courtesans awaited. The other trail veered towards investigations surrounding courtesans who had entered matrimony, taken on mistress roles, or even vanished within the past two months.
For the former pursuit, the mantle rested upon the shoulders of the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Lumian's current task revolved around unearthing a conduit to intelligence about Rue de la Muraille's clandestine tales.
Anthony Reid, an adept intelligence broker, held a key. He was well-acquainted with Bühler, a Ghost Face columnist renowned for exposing scandals and whispers that wove through the fabric of Rue de la Muraille.
Bühler, a connoisseur of drinking and writing, would frequent a corner of Hope Café where he could survey the entrance before venturing into the brothels.
With his objective clear, Lumian embarked on a steady stride toward the café nestled amidst Rue de la Muraille.
En route, he revisited the entirety of the task at hand, stirred by an indescribable emotion.
His divination capabilities paled in comparison to Franca's. A lone Prophecy Spell rested in his arsenal, a tool he dared not wield recklessly. The finesse of Anthony Reid's psychological profiling and information-gathering expertise dwarfed Lumian's own. However, mobilizing these allies allowed him to harness these strengths, akin to gaining possession of these abilities.
Lumian couldn't foretell the ramifications of ascending to godhood. Yet, one thing was certain: beneath Sequence 4, one's prowess met constraints. Cooperative squads harnessed the potential for synergy, enabling them to confront even higher

Sequences sans those with godhood.
Soon, Lumian caught sight of Hope Café, its entrance adorned in a milky-white veneer.
After pushing open the heavy door, he cast his gaze upon the corner granting anyone a vantage point.
A slender-faced man in his thirties, his ebony hair framing azure eyes, his beard trimmed meticulously and waxed to precision, met Lumian's gaze—his attention fixated on the entrance.
Sensing Lumian's scrutiny, the man's visage transformed. He reached for the soft-covered notebook and crimson fountain pen upon the table, on the verge of vanishing through the back door.
In response, Lumian drew his revolver and dispatched a shot toward the café's rear exit.
With a resounding bang, the bullet embedded itself into the wood.
The café's patrons were jolted into alarm, their reactions oscillating between concealment and inquiry, engendering chaos.
The bearded man stood immobilized, neither sure if he should run or stay.
Under the collective gaze of bartender, patrons, and staff, Lumian advanced toward his target, revolver in hand, amusement playing across his features.
"Are you Monsieur Bühler?"
"Yes, that's me." Bühler forced a smile.
Lumian gestured toward Bühler's original seat and spoke nonchalantly,
"Take a seat. I've come to purchase information."
A sigh of relief escaped Bühler as he hunched, retracing his steps to settle into the chair.
Lumian occupied the opposite seat, putting down his revolver. With a trace of playfulness, he queried, "Why the preference for such a dim corner?"
Bühler sighed and said, "In my line of work, reprisals are a constant concern. You're well aware that some individuals detest seeing their names or likenesses entangled in the web of scandals across newspapers and periodicals.
"This corner grants me an unobstructed view of the entrance, affording early detection of any potential troublemakers. And, should the need arise, I can effect a swift escape through the back."

Chapter 324: Which Is True and Which Is False

After a brief mention of the reason for selecting his seat, Bühler glanced up at Lumian, a self-deprecating smile on his lips.

"I didn't expect you to open fire so quickly."

Lumian's hand rested casually on the revolver by his side as he offered a faint smile in return.

"It seems the folks you've encountered before are law-abiding citizens."

Bühler's instincts, honed from past experiences of being beaten, urged him to retort. But as he compared Lumian's demeanor with those of his previous encounters, he found a strange logic in the man's words.

Thanks to the shelter of the law, he, a columnist for Ghost Face, had managed to survive up to this point!

"Are you not afraid of attracting the police?" Bühler turned to look at the waiter, who dared not approach with the menu and drink list. "Firing a gun in a place like this isn't a minor incident. Someone should have already alerted the authorities."

Lumian chuckled.

"That's why we have to hurry."

His words punctuated by deliberate actions, Lumian picked up his revolver, rotated the cylinder, and slotted a yellow cartridge into the empty chamber, right before Bühler's eyes.

"I want to know which courtesans have left Rue de la Muraille, this haven of extravagance, in the last two months," Lumian inquired with a calm resolve.

Instinctively, Bühler shook his head. "They aren't true courtesans. Those women possess their lavish residences and permanent paramours. They frequent high society, wielding influence over industries and policies with their words alone. This place merely acts as a reserve for courtesans."

"I'm only interested in those who fit my description." Lumian dismissed the specifics of courtesanship.

Bühler's gaze flickered between the revolver in Lumian's grip and said, recollecting,

"Four of them. Lil' Jort wed a Loen merchant and relocated to Backlund. 'White Vase' Sophie became the lover of Member of Parliament Batis, attending high society banquets and salons. She had a chance of becoming a true courtesan. 'Dew Rose' Mary fell victim to mental illness and mutilated her face with scissors one morning. She's confined to an asylum. 'Condiment Beauty' Paulina vanished from Rue de la Muraille without a trace, as though whisked away by someone of status."

As Bühler recounted, he noticed the dashing figure before him, ready to fire at the slightest provocation, producing a post-it note and a fountain pen, meticulously jotting down notes.
Swallowing unease, he continued, "I encountered Paulina on Rue Vincent not long ago. She seemed well off, with a four-wheeled carriage, a maid, a valet, and even a butler.
"Sadly, I had pressing matters then and failed to determine her place of residence."
Rue Vincent... Lumian's memory jogged. It was one of the five streets Franca had divined. Farthest from Rue de la Muraille, it exuded a quieter, upscale aura.
Based on Bühler's account, he suspected Paulina had become Guillaume Bénet's paramour.
For a fugitive, a prospective courtesan proved a safer choice than frequenting Rue de la Muraille. Guillaume Bénet was intelligent and capable. His present yearnings for intimacy and his voracious hunger hadn't rendered him a mindless imbecile. He would surely opt for a less risky strategy.
Just then, hurried footsteps resonated outside the café as three police officers neared the entrance.
Coolly, Lumian donned his dark-blue cap, stashed his note and pen, and slid 50 verl d'or notes onto the table before Bühler.
With these tasks accomplished, he reclaimed his revolver, stood up, and proceeded to the café's rear door. Swiftly, he opened it and departed.
Bang!
The police officers burst into Hope Café through its main entrance.
...
On the elegant street of Rue Vincent, stately villa-like houses adorned both sides of the road. The road was wide and well-kept, with only occasional pedestrians and carriages passing through.
After Lumian turned into the street, he found himself at a loss.
He couldn't infiltrate every house and search every room, could he?
Besides, he wasn't the most suitable candidate for this kind of investigation. Franca would be better suited for it, but involving her was risky.
After a brief contemplation, Lumian allowed a smile to grace his features. He strolled toward one of the houses and pressed the doorbell.
A young valet opened the dark-brown door. His appearance suggested no trace of Southern Continent lineage, and he gazed at Lumian in bewilderment. In a clear Trierien accent, he inquired,
"Sir, how may I assist you?"

With an amiable grin, Lumian replied, "I'm here to inquire about the most splendid madam residing on this street."
"..." The valet was momentarily speechless. This was the first instance he'd encountered someone seeking such peculiar information.
Or perhaps not. While such matters were whispered about behind closed doors and boasted about in taverns, there were occasionally individuals who exhibited curiosity about such affairs. However, who would approach a stranger's door in the sweltering sun to inquire?
What was this person up to?
Before the valet could react, Lumian produced a 10 verl d'or note and offered it with a genial demeanor.
The valet's eyelids twitched. He hesitated for a moment before accepting the payment.
He suspected this young man to be a counterfeit Dandyist, specialized in duping affluent ladies of their bodies and riches. The appearance and conduct matched the descriptions found in newspapers.
However, if the lady wasn't the valet's mistress or lady, why refuse the reward?
When the stranger acquired what he sought, a certain madam would also receive some gratification!
The valet cast a furtive glance around before lowering his voice.
"The lady in Unit 50 is exquisitely beautiful. A genuine Trierien, she married a foreigner from the southern lands. That accent..."
As the valet spoke, he shook his head with a mixture of indignation and scorn, as if he had harbored this sentiment for some time.
Lumian's smile broadened.
Indeed, under the sway of his burgeoning impulses, the padre couldn't resist sharing his prize with the neighbors—a stunning Trierien courtesan.
He might not host grand banquets or waltz to proclaim his conquest, nor would he escort his lover for a public appearance. Nonetheless, he would inevitably find subtle ways to make his neighbors aware that even foreigners could possess resplendent courtesans as mistresses.
At times like this, Guillaume Bénet had to exercise prudence in disguising himself. However, his mistress's beauty wasn't something easily concealed. She might even meticulously dress herself to exhibit her remarkable presence.
Of course, Lumian couldn't be certain if the lady was Paulina, the presumed mistress. Yet, the gradual collection of anticipated

information through bold assumptions and careful confirmation made him feel he was steadily closing in on Guillaume Bénet.
Beyond the gates of 50 Rue Vincent, Lumian glanced at the facade as an ordinary passerby might.
The three-story beige structure stood before him, surrounded by a lush green lawn and a garden vibrant with colors. A gardener tended to the greenery, offering a partial view.
Lumian promptly averted his gaze from the building's pillar, wary that prolonged observation could arouse suspicion.
As for any possibility of being recognized by the padre, Lumian held no concern. Prior to setting out, he had employed Niese Face to alter his appearance and communicated to his companions that it was due to cosmetics.
Lumian's striking appearance—a fusion of golden and black hair—could be anyone's. As long as Guillaume Bénet lacked the ability to penetrate the illusion or actively employ it, it was unlikely he'd realize his pursuer had infiltrated the vicinity.
Lumian's current plan was to leave Rue Vincent and switch places with Jenna or Franca. He would then ensconce himself in the shadows across from Unit 50, patiently observing until all suspicion around the target was dissipated.
He refrained from adopting the guise of a tramp this time, given the scarcity of such individuals on this refined street. While a rare appearance might occur, these transients were promptly shooed away by the household staff.
Just as he prepared to depart from the beige edifice, Lumian turned his head in a casual manner. His gaze alighted on a figure visible through the living room window.
The figure stood at a modest height, barely reaching 1.7 meters. Clad in a dark shirt and black trousers, the person possessed a slightly stocky build. Their nose bore a gentle curve, and their black hair fell in a mid-length cascade.
Lumian's pupils dilated for a fleeting moment before swiftly returning to their normal state.
A wisp of a smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and an invisible fire seemed to ignite in his eyes.
Despite the adept disguise, Lumian would recognize him even if he were reduced to ashes!
It was Guillaume Bénet, the padre of Cordu!
Lumian wrestled to contain his surprise, his gaze steering onward. Simultaneously, his mind raced as he evaluated the next course of action to undertake.
Before long, he reached the end of Rue Vincent.
At that very juncture, a parrot adorned with green and white

feathers took flight from Rue de la Muraille and perched itself on Lumian's shoulder. It chirped excitedly, "We've located the target!"
Located the target? Then who did I just see? Another padre? Lumian was momentarily flabbergasted and perplexed.
Which one was the genuine Guillaume Bénet? Had he erred in judgment, or had the Iron and Blood Cross Order and "Rat" Christo been deceived?
...
Fifteen minutes earlier, at the Dill Brothel on Rue de la Muraille.
Within the annex bar on the first floor, Albus savored his Lanti Proof while discreetly observing the attendants, laborers, and the overseer who managed the establishment.
His assessment encompassed the clientele as well, but it yielded nothing of note. Many concealed their identities by donning assorted masks, making it nearly impossible to unveil their true selves.
Having gained a preliminary insight into the inner workings of the Dill Brothel, Albus seized the chance to make his way toward the washroom. He veered onto the path leading to the kitchen when an attendant approached, carrying a collection of post-it notes.
This attendant's responsibility encompassed recording the requirements of each room and relaying orders to the kitchen.
Albus, marked by his dark-red hair, advanced and retrieved a handful of glistening coins along with a substantial bundle of banknotes from his pocket.
The attendant's features twisted into a blend of perplexity and intrigue.
Albus smiled and said, "I'm on the hunt for a scoundrel. Uncertain about his guise, I'm merely aware he shares your build and possesses a penchant for consorting with the most celebrated ladies. Post-exertion, he seeks sustenance to satiate his hunger immediately.
"If you're able to furnish me with the relevant particulars, all this is yours."

Chapter 325: Visit

The attendant's gaze locked onto the handful of gold coins and the banknotes, their unique ink fragrance captivating his senses. He couldn't help but hold his breath, caught in the allure of the treasure before him.

After a few heart-pounding moments, he swiftly surveyed the area, ensuring no prying eyes were nearby. Gradually, a sense of relief washed over him.

"A-all of it?" The attendant's voice quivered as he swallowed with difficulty.

With a precise flick of his wrist, Albus tossed a gold coin worth 5 verl d'or into the attendant's waiting palm. A confident smile tugged at his lips as he spoke, "That depends on the value of the information you provide. Rest assured, you'll receive another 20 verl d'or, no matter what."

The attendant gingerly bit the gold coin, stealing a glance back at the path they had traversed. His voice dropped to a hushed tone as he shared, "Just as you surmised, the man from the south, in Room 2 on the sixth floor, frequents the company of the most renowned courtesans. He possesses a penchant for pre-ordering his meals, which we dutifully deliver to his quarters every half hour."

A southerner with a penchant for famous courtesans and a habit of pre-ordered meals. Room 602... Albus wasn't one to skimp on appreciation. He tossed two 10 verl d'or coins, etched with the likeness of a warship, to the attendant.

Seizing the calmness on Rue de la Muraille, Albus covertly ascended to the sixth floor, concealing himself on the balcony at the corridor's far end.

Within mere minutes, the attendant tasked with meal deliveries arrived at Room 602, carried by a steam-powered mechanical elevator. A silver-white metal serving cart accompanied him. Carefully, he pressed the doorbell.

Albus straightened up, aligning his view with Room 602's entrance. His gaze intensified.

The door swung open, revealing a man of slight stature, not exceeding 1.7 meters. His attire comprised a pitch-black half-mask, a crisp white shirt, and pale-hued boxer shorts.

Removing his trousers but leaving his upper attire on... Concealing tattoos, perhaps? The more Albus observed, the stronger his conviction that the occupant of Room 602 matched the likeness of Guillaume Bénet from the wanted posters.

Abstaining from "disturbing" his quarry, Albus settled back into a

white-paneled armchair on the balcony. From his pocket emerged a gray-furred rat—one of Beast Tamer Christo's pets.
Lumian had engaged the services of the "Rat," his abilities allowing easy communication and efficient coordination among team members.
Naturally, Christo served as the intermediary and the "translator."
Albus tenderly patted the rat's head, signaling it with a gesture—a thumb and index finger forming a ring, with the remaining fingers raised.
This signified the discovery of the prime suspect.
With a high-pitched squeak, the rat darted from Albus's grasp, off to find its owner at a nearby tavern.
...
Upon learning from Christo's pet parrot that members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order had located the padre, Lumian found himself plunged into a momentary maelstrom of shock and confusion.
Had they truly found Guillaume Bénet? Then, who did I see?
If the occupant of 50 Rue Vincent is Guillaume Bénet, where did the counterfeit they see come from?
In the whirlwind of his thoughts, a realization struck Lumian with the force of lightning.
Substitution Spell!
Guillaume Bénet must have enacted the Substitution Spell ritual!
It was one of the five specialized ritualistic magics Lumian had acquired as an Alms Monk. The padre, now a Sequence 5 Fate Appropriator, was evidently familiar with it.
This ritual enabled the user to choose another person to inhabit their identity for a period upon sensing impending danger. By gaining the genuine or fake approval of those around them and establishing a strong mystical connection, a ritual could then finalize the switch.
If the Substitution Spell succeeded, the stand-in would be indistinguishable from the original in the eyes of others, although their self-awareness and performance might be compromised to a degree. Nevertheless, their core identity would remain.
When the substitute faced imminent disaster, the one who cast the Substitution Spell could alter their own fate, thus avoiding the impending calamity.
Of course, this hinged on the substitute being kept unaware of the impending danger.
While this ruse could prove effective on other Beyonders, Lumian was well-acquainted with the circumstances surrounding the Substitution Spell. Thus, he couldn't be easily deceived.

For Lumian, the paramount issue at hand was this: Which individual was the true Guillaume Bénet, and which was the substitute?
To deal a decisive blow to the padre and apprehend him with minimal casualties, Lumian needed to consolidate his forces and make a choice. He couldn't attack both entities simultaneously.
Gardner Martin had merely agreed to assist in locating the "prey," without extending further support. Consequently, the majority of individuals dispatched by the Iron and Blood Cross Order were Low-Sequence Beyonders or even regular people.
If Lumian opted to solicit Gardner Martin's aid, it might take hours for the Iron and Blood Cross Order to assemble sufficient reinforcements. Guillaume Bénet didn't possess limitless endurance, and the courtesan wasn't a Demoness of Pleasure who could allow an extended encounter. He would definitely be gone by then.
The question remains: *What decision would Guillaume Bénet make?* Would he have the substitute remain at the residence to divert danger while he ventured out for personal pursuits? Alternatively, would he dispatch the substitute to showcase his characteristic behavior, drawing danger away from himself? Lumian found both scenarios challenging to dismiss.
After deliberation, his gaze shifted to the green and white parrot. He addressed it, "Locate 'Red Boots' Franca and ask her to divine the authenticity of the Guillaume Bénet at 50 Rue Vincent and the one present here."
The parrot stared at Lumian as if questioning his sanity. "I'm just a parrot."
What I said is too complicated. It can't understand or memorize everything? Lumian swiftly arrived at a decision.
"Guide me to 'Red Boots' Franca. Actually, first lead me to Christo."
Time remained on their side. The individual at 50 Rue Vincent couldn't elude them. The team responsible for the mission could convene briefly, exchanging essential information.
In the shadows they lingered, while their foes roamed in plain sight. As long as they didn't startle the targets, they could afford to wait. Of course, they had to conclude before Guillaume Bénet's deed with the courtesan reached its conclusion. After all, tailing an individual posed inherent risks, especially when dealing with the padre and his array of bizarre and unfamiliar abilities.
...
In a narrow alley near Rue de la Muraille.
The afternoon sun cast its radiant touch upon the mostly dismantled barricade, while even the breeze seemed to take a

momentary pause.
Franca, now garbed in an Assassin's attire, and Jenna, disguised as a female mercenary, rendezvoused with Anthony Reid, still clad in his military green attire, and Lumian, sporting a cap, a black vest, and a white shirt.
Lumian delivered a succinct briefing, omitting details about the Substitution Spell due to time constraints, referring to it merely as a form of witchcraft capable of generating lifelike substitutes.
Before Lumian could inquire further, Franca retrieved a mirror from her possession. As her fingers grazed the surface, she intoned an incantation.
Soon, an aqueous luminescence radiated from the mirror, accompanied by an aged voice.
"They are both real."
Both real... Franca turned to Lumian in surprise.
The witchcraft responsible for creating the substitute proves potent —resembling the original down to appearance and fate. Conventional divination methods stand powerless against such deception!
Both real... Lumian had anticipated this response and had already devised an alternative course of action.
Sensing his silence, Franca drew a deep breath, hesitatingly suggesting, "D-Do you need me to consult another source?"
She aimed to seek confirmation from the entity renowned for unerring divination.
Yet, this approach risked unveiling a question that could render her socially deceased before Jenna, Lumian, and Anthony Reid.
She envisioned the other party asking, "Do you often entertain the idea of doing the deed with Jenna?"
How would she navigate her future interactions with Jenna?
Lumian shook his head, asserting, "No need. I have a plan."
Turning his attention to Jenna, he directed, "Conceal yourself in the shadows diagonally across from Room 602 in Dill. Keep a vigilant watch on that Guillaume Bénet's activities.
"If he concludes his affairs and prepares to depart, but we haven't arrived yet, refrain from impulsive pursuit. Instead, discreetly monitor his movements from a distance and deduce his chosen path."
"Understood." Jenna nodded, mentally rehearsing her upcoming task.
Lumian shifted his focus to Franca and Anthony Reid.
"Let's proceed to 50 Rue Vincent together. I'll directly confront Guillaume Bénet. Franca, maintain invisibility and follow me closely. We mustn't launch an attack until we're certain of his

authenticity.
"Anthony, secure the perimeter outside. If the Guillaume Bénet on Rue Vincent proves to be counterfeit and we hasten to Dill, covertly monitor the madame there, tracking her movements. In case Guillaume Bénet manages an escape, she could serve as a pivotal lead for subsequent pursuit.
"If the 50 Rue Vincent counterpart is genuine and a skirmish erupts, approach discreetly and provide reinforcement."
Franca harbored no objections to this arrangement. Aware of Lumian's teleportation abilities, she grasped that once he confirmed the Rue Vincent Guillaume as fake, he could facilitate swift transition for the primary combatants to the opposite location, preventing the two Guillaumes from "exchanging information."
Assessing the calculated risks, Anthony endorsed the plan, confirming his willingness to execute his designated role.
...
50 Rue Vincent, near the beige three-story building.
Observing Franca's seamless invisibility, Lumian raised his right hand and swept it across his face.
In an instant, he transformed into a man in his thirties, attired in a black uniform with an inspector's epaulet.
Niese Face!
Satisfied with his condition, Lumian proceeded to the designated building and pressed the doorbell.
The door swung open, revealing a man garbed as a butler. His gaze landed on Lumian as he inquired with a touch of confusion, "Officer, how may I assist you?"
"I'm here regarding a missing vagrant case linked to this street. I'd appreciate a conversation with your master," Lumian nonchalantly fabricated.
A subtle shift occurred in the butler's expression.
"Please wait a moment, Officer. I shall inquire with our master."
After a brief pause, the butler returned to the doorway, addressing Lumian, "Officer, our master invites you to the small parlor on the ground floor."
Lumian offered a slight nod and trailed the butler into the abode at 50 Rue Vincent.
The living area exuded spaciousness, hosting a bluish-gray cat huddled in one corner, its presence accompanied by the ceaseless chirping of caged birds. Positioned in the aisle, a black dog, reminiscent of a hound, remained seated, its gaze unwaveringly fixated on the unfamiliar entrant.
Circumventing an elegant sofa, the butler led Lumian into a parlor

towards the rear. There, a man with midnight hair, azure eyes, and a slightly hooked nose reclined in an armchair. He sported a dark-hued shirt and black trousers, his demeanor one of relaxed arrogance as he gently caressed the head of a sizable brown-furred dog.

"Officer, in what way may I be of assistance?" The man inquired, rising with deliberate languor.

It's him—Guillaume Bénet! Padre Guillaume Bénet! Lumian's pupils contracted, closing the distance to a mere five meters.

Then, he parted his lips and voiced, "Ha!"

Action was the sole path to distinguishing the genuine from the imposter!

Chapter 326: Substitute

"Ha!"

Lumian's right chest glowed faintly. His Spirit Body quivered as a yellowish beam shot forth from his mouth.

It instantly struck Guillaume Bénet, dressed in a dark shirt and black pants, causing him to collapse in confusion and shock.

Spell of Harrumph!

He's fake! Lumian's eyes narrowed as he assessed the situation. He wasn't too surprised by the outcome.

It was evident that this wasn't the real Guillaume Bénet—a Sequence 5 Fate Appropriator. The way the man reacted to the attack, coupled with his lack of familiarity with Beyonder powers and mysticism, made Lumian believe that the substitute was an ordinary person thrust into an unfamiliar world.

Disregarding the bewildered butler, Lumian swiftly turned on his heels and sprinted out of the compact living room.

As he ran, he whispered, "To Dill!"

Franca, draped in her hooded, leather-armored black robe, materialized in front of Lumian.

Lumian grabbed her shoulder, allowing the black mark on his right shoulder to flicker with a dark light.

Amidst the swirling maelstrom of vibrant hues, the duo found themselves on the balcony of Dill's sixth floor.

Having sent Jenna to inform Albus previously, Lumian had already memorized the coordinates.

Upon seeing her companion arrive, Jenna, dressed as a female mercenary, emerged from the shadows. She pointed at Room 602 and lowered her voice.

"It's not over yet.

"Dammit, he's dragging this out!"

"The second round, perhaps?" Lumian chuckled.

According to Albus, the occupant of Room 602 had already blown his load once before having afternoon tea. Now, it had begun again.

"The soundproofing here is impressive," Franca remarked, her head tilting as she listened for any signs of activity from within Room 602.

Jenna observed as Lumian wiped his face, disguising himself as a typical Dill brothel attendant. She clicked her tongue and voiced her thoughts.

"That woman in there screams occasionally. Dammit, is that perverted padre into some abusive stuff?"

Jenna, an underground singer frequenting bars and dance halls,

had cultivated an open and passionate image. Her close rapport with Franca, who managed the dancers, exposed her to a world beyond the ordinary. She had zero experience, but her insights were substantial.
Franca caught on swiftly. She modulated her voice and clicked her tongue.
Lumian, his Niese Face transforming him, glanced at Franca, silently requesting her to sprinkle fluorescent powder in the corridor outside Room 602.
A countermeasure against Guillaume Bénet's invisibility!
Lumian knew that the invisibility didn't erase traces or scents. Should Guillaume Bénet escape into the corridor during combat, the fluorescent powder would create a luminous trail, guiding Lumian's pursuit.
However, Lumian reconsidered and decided that the use of fluorescent powder might be too conspicuous. Guillaume Bénet could easily detect the abnormality and escape using his bizarre abilities before Lumian could launch a surprise attack.
After a moment's reflection, Lumian leaned in to whisper to Franca, "Deploy Invisibility to conceal yourself in the corridor. Use invisible spider silk to create a web that covers the target's door from the ground to the ceiling."
This approach would neutralize the effectiveness of Invisibility, while also entangling Guillaume Bénet if he attempted to employ Slow Flight.
"No problem." Franca adjusted her black hood and entered the corridor.
In a blink, her form dissolved, as if a snowman had melted in the sun.
Seven to eight seconds later, a gentle breeze brushed against Lumian's legs.
He was taken aback for a moment before comprehending.
Franca is using the invisible spider silk to signal readiness.
Since this dude advanced to a Demoness of Pleasure, everything she does carries a sense of teasing... Yeah, she just advanced and might not have full control over the potion's power. She could be unwittingly affected...
Muttering inwardly, Lumian shifted his attention to Jenna and instructed, "Conceal yourself in the shadows here. If Guillaume Bénet flees this way, you can shoot or execute an assassination. If that fails, withdraw immediately. If he heads in another direction, don't pursue."
"Got it." Jenna, well-versed in these situations, didn't push for more involvement.

She understood that her capabilities could be effectively deployed only under specific circumstances.
With his team arranged, Lumian pivoted and directed his gaze at the wooden door of Room 602.
He inhaled deeply, exhaling slowly to steady his nerves.
With that, he fetched an armchair from the balcony and positioned it in the corridor.
The invisible spider silk avoided him as he moved some distance away from Room 602 and set down the chair.
In the following moment, he lightly tapped the chair's back. Crimson flames flowed from his palm, slithering over the chair like serpents.
As the armchair caught fire, Lumian jogged toward Room 602 without attempting to conceal his movements. He rapped his knuckles against the wooden door.
"What is it?"
A voice tinged with contained anger reverberated from within Room 602, indicating a pivotal juncture.
"Fire! There's a fire!" Lumian shouted in feigned panic.
"Son of a sow!" The male voice inside cursed in a Riston Province accent.
Simultaneously, Hunter Lumian detected a distinctive motion—someone getting off the bed.
Two to three seconds later, the door swung open, revealing a naked man wearing an iron-colored half-mask and a white shirt, his lower half exposed.
A brunette, clad in a fishnet nightgown, was still draped over him.
Holy heck, can't you even let go of her? Franca's amused commentary echoed in Lumian's mind from her invisible position diagonally across.
However, Lumian's focus was unshaken. When the suspected Guillaume Bénet appeared, his gaze flickering towards the smoky, flaming chair, Lumian acted swiftly.
"Ha!"
Another yellowish beam shot forth, piercing through both the man in the iron-colored half-mask and the woman in the fishnet nightgown, enveloping them.
A glimpse of shock and panic flashed across the eyes of the supposed Guillaume Bénet, revealing his grasp of Beyonder powers. Then, his eyes dulled, and he collapsed, a fraction after the woman.
As the sound of something heavy thudding to the floor echoed, Lumian seemed to enter a surreal trance.
Impossible. A Fate Appropriator like Guillaume Bénet couldn't be

knocked out by a Contractee's Spell of Harrumph...
Is he a decoy?
The one at 50 Rue Vincent was an imposter too!
Where is the real Guillaume Bénet?
Shaking off his momentary daze, Lumian knelt, peeling off the iron-colored mask from the unconscious man.
The face beneath was unnervingly familiar—it was the hooked-nose countenance of Guillaume Bénet.
Darkening with concern, Lumian pushed the half-dressed woman away from his target and tore open the white shirt.
In the next heartbeat, his eyes fell upon three black marks resembling signatures on the unconscious man's upper body—one on the left chest, one on the right chest, and another on the abdomen.
This wasn't Guillaume Bénet!
Guillaume Bénet held more than three contracts—probably a dozen or more!
All fake? All substitutes? Lumian clenched his fists, his eyes igniting with an invisible blaze.
He rose, dragging the man, an identical look-alike of Guillaume Bénet, back into Room 602. Then, he found a blanket, swathed the unconscious woman, and deposited her in the corridor.
In the interim, Franca discerned the falsity of the prey once again, vanishing her invisibility. She summoned frost and doused the flames consuming the armchair.
As she transferred the woman from the corridor to a vacant room, Lumian extended his right hand, fingers closing around the throat of the Inevitability bestowed.
With a decisive snap, he broke the man's neck, rendering him unconscious and lifeless.
Following that, he shut the wooden door, drew the ritual silver dagger, and sanctified it. A wall of spirituality enshrouded Room 602.
Subsequently, Lumian initiated the Summoning Dance, opting to engage in a preliminary, purpose-driven spirit channeling through this method.
He had chosen not to enlist Franca's aid for a reason: he was uncertain about the peculiar creatures the deceased had contracted. It was possible they would induce corresponding corruption. Only Lumian, having long been an Inevitability bestowed, remained unaffected by the spirit channeling process.
The sedatives and the last remnants of truth serum from the Bliss Society were reserved for use on the real padre.
...

Diagonally opposite 50 Rue Vincent.
Perched on the second floor of the building and ensconced in cover, Anthony Reid, steadfastly observing the target, espied a graceful lady in a pale-green gown hurrying out, accompanied by her valet, maid, and butler. The group entered a carriage, deftly relocated from the rear to the front entrance, before embarking toward the far end of Rue Vincent.
Without precipitously giving chase, Anthony meticulously memorized specific details concerning the carriage and the horses.
...
Amidst the fervent and contorted dance, the departed spirit detached from its corporeal vessel, hovering midair. It cast a glare laden with animosity and perplexity upon Lumian.
Drawing his own blood, Lumian enacted a command, compelling the spirit to bind to him.
Although desire and voracity ignited within him, Lumian remained resolute, detecting an additional presence.
Summoning the Abyss Demon Flower...
Invisibility...
Transfiguration... Dammit!
An involuntary curse escaped Lumian's lips.
He began to grasp the unfolding situation!
The individual at 50 Rue Vincent was possibly a product of the Substitution Spell. The one at the Dill brothel, on the other hand, had been fashioned as a substitute by Guillaume Bénet, utilizing Transfiguration, exploiting its negative effects.
He was vigilant against anyone exploiting his negative effects to track him down!
Transfiguration was a contractual ability capable of altering a person's appearance, physique, and disposition. It also possessed a measure of resistance against divination. The price exacted was one's own visage, with the detrimental side effect manifesting as a desire for the exploitation of others.
Lumian steadied himself, summoning to mind the genuine Guillaume Bénet—his visage, his deeds. This resonance united with the memories that had left the most indelible mark on the spirit of the deceased, enabling Lumian to hunt for clues.
In due course, a cluster of seven or eight memories quivered slightly. Lumian selected one, striving to magnify it for deeper understanding.

Chapter 327: The Real Guillaume Bénet

The memories of the false Guillaume Bénet surged, and Lumian found himself immersed in the familiar confines of 50 Rue Vincent's cozy parlor.

Draped in an air of regal poise, the counterfeit Guillaume Bénet stood before the armchair, addressing the recipient of these memories with calculated words, "Take this money and venture to Rue de la Muraille. There, seek out the renowned courtesan of utmost repute. But you must assume my looks, veiled by a mask."

With humility and deference, the memory's owner bowed. "Understood, Archbishop."

And thus, this memory concluded. Lumian held a steadfast conviction that the Inevitability bestowed before him was a meticulously crafted proxy, a construct devised by none other than Guillaume Bénet himself.

It appeared that he had likely garnered a cohort of adherents to Inevitability. From among them, he had singled out a candidate from southern Intis, one who swiftly reaped three successive boons. This candidate was meticulously endowed with the same abilities as him: the summoning of the Abyss Demon Flower and the shroud of Invisibility. This granted him an impeccable guise, perfectly mirroring the true him thanks to the contracts' negative effects.

Of course, Transfiguration remained an integral, indispensable ability.

From this vantage, it became evident that Guillaume Bénet hadn't neglected the adverse ramifications of the specialized covenant. He might have contemplated this from inception or perhaps gained insight subsequent to a dire prophecy, reviewing his recent undertakings. Regardless, this counterfeit Guillaume Bénet—proficient in Transfiguration—appeared to be a deliberate ruse.

Lumian suspected the presence of other Inevitability devotees who clandestinely monitored the Dill brothel. They clandestinely shadowed the sham Guillaume Bénet, primed to relay swift notification to the authentic padre should danger befall his double. In such a scenario, Guillaume Bénet enjoyed a distinct advantage—whether he elected to abscond, leaving the product of this Substitution Spell to grapple with looming peril, or opted to ensnare his antagonists using the doppelganger as bait.

Synthesized with the fragments of the fake Guillaume Bénet's recollections, Lumian surmised that the genuine Guillaume Bénet primarily resided at 50 Rue Vincent. Yet, he permitted the substitute to operate overtly, effectively obfuscating his true

whereabouts.
Upon this realization, Lumian harbored a pang of vexation.
Had Albus not unearthed the sham Guillaume Bénet within the confines of the Dill brothel, Lumian wouldn't have been lured away from the decoy; he would have been affixed on the Guillaume at 50 Rue Vincent. This would have spared him the frenzied teleportation prompted after the incapacitation of the Substitution Spell's byproduct. Lumian would have gravitated towards scouring the building, conceivably unearthing the genuine Guillaume Bénet.
Granted, absent the synchronous "appearance" of Guillaume Bénet, Lumian wouldn't have entertained notions of a Substitution Spell. He'd have likely fallen prey to deception, swerving far from the path leading to the authentic padre.
With this epiphany at the forefront, Lumian cast aside his intention to scout for lurking Inevitability adherents. Recognizing that the bona fide Guillaume Bénet had been alerted, Lumian terminated his Summoning Dance and dissolved the wall of spirituality. Turning to Franca and Jenna, shrouded in separate shadows, he intoned, "Let's head to 50 Rue Vincent now."
Presently, Lumian clung to the hope that vestiges of clues lingered or that Anthony Reid, entrusted with overseeing the locale, had gleaned pertinent insights...
Franca and Jenna emerged from the shadows one after another, wasting no time to inquire about the current situation. Lumian grabbed their shoulders and activated spirit world traversal once more.
In the blink of an eye, their forms solidified within the modest confines of 50 Rue Vincent's parlor.
Absent were the butler, valets, and maids, leaving an unattended figure—unconscious, the result of the Substitution Spell—laid out on the carpet.
A meticulous scan of the surroundings concluded with Lumian's approach. He knelt beside the proxy, employing a variety of techniques to rouse him from his stupor.
As the counterfeit Guillaume Bénet's eyes fluttered open, they met an unfamiliar visage.
Startled, he jolted upright, fear tinting his tone. "Who are you? Why did you barge into my house? Get out! I'll call the police! I'll call the police!"
He recollected the recent attack—a curse-like assault!
Lumian drew his revolver and pressed it against the fake Guillaume Bénet's forehead.
The substitute fell silent.

"Where is the true master of this residence?" Lumian's voice resounded, deep and steady.
As if pierced by a sudden realization, the imposter Guillaume Bénet spat out, "I am the true master!
"I'm the master here!"
Lumian's lips curled into a smile.
"In that case, I offer my sympathies. Your wife, it seems, ran off with the butler with your valuables. The valets and maids, meanwhile, seem to have embraced an opportunistic approach—essentially relieving you of anything tangible except this house.
"In a while, the police will arrest you, citing your involvement in the slaying of a vagrant and perpetrating cultic rituals and extensive deceit."
A mosaic of fact and conjecture, Lumian's words emerged with an intent to intimidate the substitute, dismantling any fantastical illusions.
Considering the retreat of the madame, butler, valets, maids, coachman, and gardener from 50 Rue Vincent, Lumian inferred their conversion into believers of Inevitability, orchestrated by the genuine padre. This intricate maneuver camouflaged a multitude of cultic practices and eccentric observances, all harmonized through the Substitution Spell.
The false Guillaume Bénet at Dill, having reached Sequence 7 Contractee status, was indicative of multiple instances of boon-request rituals in Trier. Innocents would undoubtedly become sacrifices, and the best candidates were undoubtedly tramps.
At Lumian's declaration, the imitation Guillaume Bénet gazed about, bewildered and panic-stricken, his voice piercingly beseeching, "Paulina! Paulina!"
Paulina... It's indeed the Condiment Beauty. Unfortunately, she's now a heretic... Lumian watched as the fake Guillaume Bénet fell silent, his eyes filled with despair.
"Any final words?" Lumian inquired once more.
The fake Guillaume Bénet shuddered and said, "I'm real. I'm really the master of this place!
"However, that woman—that woman is a succubus. She surreptitiously lured someone and ensconced him within the cellar!
"Sh-she's having an affair with a devil!"
Affair with a devil... In the basement... Was she secretly meeting the real padre in private? Yes, the negative effects of Guillaume Bénet's desire for coitus will always exist. They won't disappear just because he has two substitutes... Lumian scrutinized the mock Guillaume Bénet, who tenaciously clung to his façade as the

genuine master of 50 Rue Vincent. Left hand poised, he controlled his might, and with precision, delivered a calculated blow behind the imposter's ear.
The fake Guillaume Bénet fainted again.
Lumian's strategy entailed swift exploration of the residence, as allowing the imposter to run amok could inadvertently trigger calamity.
He rose to his feet, massaging his throbbing temples, and turned to Franca and Jenna for an update. "Any word from Anthony Reid?"
"No." Franca shook her head gently. "It seems he followed your directive to trail Madame Paulina."
Lumian tersely acknowledged.
"Then let's search this place and await his feedback."
Franca adjusted her black hood and emphasized, "One team of three. Don't split up."
This was the "territory" of the heretics. Even if they had already escaped, residual vestiges might still remain. Should they split their efforts and encounter mishaps, timely rescue would be jeopardized.
When the authorities carried out such operations, they had to be at least in groups of three or within sight of each other if they wanted to split up.
Lumian issued a pointed gesture toward the staircase adjacent to the parlor, "Let's proceed to the basement."
The trio descended, and as they did, Franca leaned to Jenna, her tone hushed,
"Ciel's exchange with the counterfeit was textbook instigation. When you return, dissect the intent behind each phrase."
"Okay." Jenna absorbed the counsel like a parched sponge.
In due course, they reached the basement door. Lumian turned toward his companions,
"Preparations before we venture inside."
To thwart lingering echoes of Inevitability's powers or unconventional creatures, precaution was paramount.
Promptly, Lumian, now adorned with altered visage and partially lengthened hair, pushed the door open, revealing the basement's dim recesses.
Within, an unremarkable array of miscellaneous items cluttered the space. No conspicuous anomalies were apparent.
Just as Franca readied for Magic Mirror Divination, Lumian, with his Hunter's acumen, discerned subtle traces.
With metallic clinks, he unveiled a concealed door.
Beyond lay a stairwell descending further into the subterranean depths.

The trio descended cautiously, arriving after moments at a vast yet rudimentary chamber, bathed in gas lamp radiance.
It was unknown if Guillaume Bénet had created it himself or if he had sealed off a portion of Underground Trier and modified it into a private "territory."
In the center of the stone-floored hall stood an altar, surrounded by ghastly white human bones, complete sheepskin, cowhide, and giant canine skin.
Upon seeing this, Lumian was taken aback as he recalled one of the five special ritualistic magics that Alms Monk had:
Animal Creation Spell!
Simultaneously, remembrances of the felines, avians, and canines inhabiting the floor above, and the brown-furred dog nestled beside the mock Guillaume Bénet, surged forth.
Dog... Dog... Animal Creation Spell... With an epiphanic rush, Lumian pieced together the genuine Guillaume Bénet's concealment.
He had invoked the Animal Creation Spell to transmute himself into the hulking, brown-furred canine. In this form, he paraded brazenly before his counterfeit and the surrounding onlookers.
With a recitation of the preordained incantation, the true Guillaume Bénet could rapidly molt his canine facade, resuming his human guise.
...
In the confines of the parlor, the counterfeit Guillaume Bénet remained enshrouded in an unconscious reverie, utterly oblivious to the stark duality between reality and illusion.
Cautiously, he inched the guest room door ajar, greeted by a jarring tableau. Before him sprawled his beautiful wife, Paulina, ensconced upon the sumptuous bed, unclothed, whilst a hulking brown-furred canine loomed beside her. At the bedside, a plate bearing a medium-cooked steak was positioned...
...
Amidst clenched teeth, Lumian communicated the enigma of the Animal Creation Spell and his speculative hypothesis to Franca and Jenna, his words resounding, "I hope we find that damned dog. No, he should have shed his dog skin by now."
Animal Creation Spell... Humans turning into dogs... Jenna was alarmed.
The world of mysticism is so bizarre and terrifying!
The three of them worked together and swiftly searched for traces.
Before long, Jenna picked up something from a crevice in the stone slab and exclaimed in surprise, "I've found something!"
Franca ran over and realized it was brown dog fur.

Both approached Lumian, who continued his investigative fervor, presenting their find.
Lumian's elation was palpable. He postulated Guillaume Bénet's evasion via an underground covert route, disentangling him from Paulina and the rest.
Then, they discovered a few strands of brown dog fur. Following the fur, they found another hidden door.
After opening the hidden door in the rock wall, Franca performed a simple Magic Mirror Divination and received a revelation that nothing was amiss. Then, she followed Lumian and Jenna in.
At that moment, Jenna, who was in the middle of the group, lost sight of Lumian. Franca was still following behind her.
Without waiting for Jenna to speak, Franca surveyed the room and frowned.
"We've circled back to the sacrificial hall."
...
Emerging through the secret door, Lumian entered an expanse echoing a quarry's cavern.
With gas lamps conspicuously absent, Lumian summoned forth a crimson blaze to pierce the shadows.
Almost simultaneously, he sensed that Jenna and Franca hadn't followed him.
We got separated just like that? Puzzlement swirled within Lumian's mind, overridden by a low voice that echoed from the abandoned mine's depths: "Lumian Lee!"

Chapter 328: Bottle of Fiction

"Lumian Lee!"

Lumian found himself frozen in place, his gaze distant as he reacted to the ominous growl.

In a shadowy corner of the abandoned mine, a figure outlined itself.

Clad in a complete coat of brown dog skin, the figure's torso and abdomen burst open, revealing a human form adorned in a white robe, embellished with intricate silver and black threads.

Without a sound, the canine skin dropped to the ground, unveiling a man of slight stature, barely reaching 1.7 meters.

His thin black hair framed a face with sharply intense blue eyes, and a slightly upturned nose added to his air of authority. This was none other than Guillaume Bénet, the padre of Cordu Village!

At that very moment, a smile graced Guillaume Bénet's lips. He held a white human bone in his grasp, his eyes aflame with a fanatical zeal that suggested he was on the cusp of receiving a newfound boon from the forces of Inevitability, a boon that could reshape his destiny.

Guillaume Bénet's initial instinct was to flee from 50 Rue Vincent the moment he saw his decoy incapacitated by the strange spell, and his adversary vanishing through the aid of spirit world traversal.

In doing so, the decoy could fulfill its full potential of averting disaster. He would escape the looming catastrophe, embarking on a fresh start in a new location, unburdened by the present circumstances.

Yet, within an instant, his abilities as a Fate Appropriator alerted him to the anomaly in the assailant's destiny and the lingering traces of a formidable entity aligned with the Inevitability pathway.

From this revelation, he deduced that the individual responsible was Lumian Lee, the very person harboring the angel he had once tirelessly invoked!

Rapid thoughts raced through Guillaume Bénet's mind. As a devoted adherent to the might of Inevitability, he was instantly consumed by zealous fervor.

He sought to capture or eliminate Lumian Lee!

He aspired to break the seal, allowing Inevitability's angel to truly descend upon the land!

He yearned to obtain a godhood boon, breaking free from the constraints of mortality. He longed to stand as Inevitability's chosen representative, guiding the troves of foolish humanity.

Having swiftly assessed the situation on both fronts, Guillaume Bénet ordered Paulina and the others to flee, luring any potential allies of Lumian Lee away from the scene. Meanwhile, he left behind the "substitute," creating a trail of clues for Lumian Lee to follow—leading him into the basement to unveil a hidden door.

With his preparations in place, Guillaume Bénet entered the sacrificial chamber, deliberately preserving the sheepskin, cowhide, and dog skin. This would enable Lumian Lee, already versed in the Animal Creation Spell, to swiftly uncover the truth.

Simultaneously, he shook off a tuft of dog fur, inadvertently revealing his escape route. He chanted the incantation he had prearranged, dispelling the Animal Creation Spell. Drawing upon his concealed power, Guillaume Bénet unlocked the door leading to Underground Trier—a contractual power known as the Bottle of Fiction.

This ability, a source of personal avarice, enabled Guillaume Bénet to convert designated, modest-sized spaces—those harboring symbolic elements like doors and windows—into realms encapsulated within the Bottle of Fiction. He could impose simple entry conditions, permitting only those who met the prerequisites to enter, while others would be promptly returned to their original positions.

Guillaume Bénet's stipulation for entry was "one bearing the power of Inevitability."

This criterion was one he shared with Lumian Lee. Regardless of whether Lumian had embraced Inevitability's boon, as a carrier of the Inevitability angel, enmeshed in the threads of fate, he undeniably possessed Inevitability's power. This design ensured that Lumian's allies couldn't breach the Bottle of Fiction's barrier without a boon of Inevitability. It left only Lumian Lee and himself secluded within. And if they had indeed embraced Inevitability, they would both remain influenced by the great existence—transforming them into equivalent companions during pivotal moments.

Guillaume Bénet sidestepped the utilization of individuals hailing from Cordu as entry criteria into the Bottle of Fiction, as it posed a vexing challenge to confirm such origins. Such a determination demanded consultation with the spirit world, unlike the more direct assessment of one possessing a distinct power.

Furthermore, should Paulina and the others manage to elude their pursuers and return to this very spot, they could provide essential aid through the opening of the bottle.

Having meticulously orchestrated his plan, Guillaume Bénet concealed himself, poised for Lumian Lee's entry into the Bottle of

Fiction.
As anticipated, upon seeing Lumian Lee, now under an altered guise yet devoid of any traces of the Inevitability angel's influence, Guillaume Bénet took swift action, invoking the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell.
Understanding that Lumian Lee wasn't the individual's original name but had been assumed for nearly six years, recognized by all those around him, Guillaume Bénet was certain this identity held a mystic connection that could serve as the true name.
Endowed with the knowledge of Cordu as its padre, he possessed a certain insight into Lumian Lee's circumstances. With conviction in the efficacy of the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell, he anticipated it would gravely disorient Lumian Lee.
Observing Lumian Lee's form, frozen at the threshold of the Bottle of Fiction, head bowed and body swaying with instability, Guillaume Bénet's grin expanded.
Acting without hesitation or speech, he hurled the white human bone he clutched, intending to employ a curse spell capable of rendering the target comatose indefinitely.
With this achieved and Lumian Lee under his sway, his intention was to retrieve the pre-prepared ritual sheepskin, enshroud the captive, and intone the incantation, transforming him into a voiceless, nearly powerless sheep.
At that juncture, Guillaume Bénet could lead the sheep elsewhere, endeavoring to shatter the seal and unleash the imprisoned angel.
Once successful, he would ascend to sainthood, becoming a potent human figure bestowed with godhood powers!
Smack!
As the bone landed, Guillaume Bénet surged forward, rapidly enunciating a Hermes incantation.
"Blind, d..."
Midway through the chant, the padre—having made all of Cordu village a sacrificial offering—suddenly experienced a tightening within his chest, an uncommon premonition heralded by fate.
For him, such premonitions occurred rarely. Including this instance, it was the second occurrence. The prior occasion had led him to reassess his actions upon arriving in Trier, spurring him to execute the Substitution Spell and Transfiguration, generating a substitute.
With absolute faith in Inevitability, Guillaume Bénet ceased his chant and lunged to the side.
In the next second, he heard Lumian's voice.
"Hmph!"
A nearly imperceivable white beam shot forth from Lumian's

nostrils, impacting the precise spot where Guillaume Bénet had stood. The beam streaked through the air, vanishing upon contact with the uneven gray-black terrain.
Lumian's gaze lifted, his eyes extraordinarily clear, seemingly untouched by the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell.
Concealed beneath his elongated hair, his ears were snugly filled with soft paper balls!
In anticipation of residual effects upon entering the basement, he had taken precautionary measures, blocking his ears and altering his appearance to fend off the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell's influence.
How could I be affected if I can't even hear you call my name?
Admittedly, the paper balls couldn't wholly stifle sound. A faint shout did reach Lumian, though he failed to discern it as his name. The impact was but a mild vertigo, quickly dissipating.
Capitalizing on this opportunity, he deduced the affliction he had confronted to be the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell. With feigned gravity, he baited his lurking adversary into revealing himself, launching a surprise counter with the Spell of Harrumph.
Yet, Lumian hadn't envisaged Guillaume Bénet as his assailant.
Unwilling to flee just yet, he clung to his resolve to confront the foe and liberate the imprisoned angel!
Such a determination heightened Lumian's intensity, a fusion of anxiety and exultation, an undercurrent of madness underscoring his elation.
Instantaneously, Guillaume Bénet vanished upon landing beside him. Ebony tendrils, contorted like serpentine forms, descended from the mine's apex, shrouding the Bottle of Fiction in an enveloping embrace, blossoming into colossal flowers as crimson as blood.
Circling the entryway, Lumian retrieved the iron-gray military alcohol flask, uncapped it, and withdrew the Decency brooch.
Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! Emerald-green arrows exuding a pale pallor streaked forth from the rear of the black vine, piercing the space Lumian had just vacated.
Where these arrows connected, the rocks and earth seemed to undergo the assault of concentrated acid, manifesting glaring and exaggerated signs of corrosion.
After donning the Decency brooch, Lumian's form agilely evaded the Ghastly Green Arrows, targeting his cranium. Simultaneously, he genuflected and inclined forward, palms pressed to the gravel and dirt.
Abruptly, vermillion flames surged forth, forging a crescent-like barrier.

This fiery barricade extended in all directions, kindling the obsidian vines in its path and inciting the vivid flowers, their fierce maws agape.
An inconspicuous, saccharine aroma permeated the air, inducing a drowsy haze, an inclination toward slumber.
Guillaume Bénet, unveiling himself after launching the Ghastly Green Arrows, nimbly shifted his position. Inhaling the anesthetic gas engendered by the blazing Abyss Demon Flowers, he beheld the crimson wall poised to transmute the entire abandoned mine into an inferno.
Why would Lumian Lee ignite the Abyss Demon Flowers, knowing they induce sleep? A momentary bewilderment flashed across Guillaume Bénet.
In a flash, his insight converged with Lumian's stratagem.
Lumian aimed to cultivate an environment saturated with anesthetic gas, an environment impartial to ally or adversary alike!
In essence, this would induce slumber in Lumian Lee as well as Guillaume Bénet. Lumian's companions stood sentry outside the Bottle of Fiction. It was conceivable they would soon decipher a means to shatter the contract spell's hold!
Comprehending this, Guillaume Bénet emitted a disdainful snort, his visage adorned with a metallic sheen.
Steel Body!
This was also a contract ability he had never exhibited in front of Lumian Lee.
Temporarily morphing him into a metallic entity, it rendered Guillaume Bénet impervious to the anesthetic gas's effects!
Naturally, metamorphosing into a metallic entity would curtail his capacity to wield most of his abilities.
...
Outside the Bottle of Fiction.
Upon grasping that she and Jenna had returned to the sacrificial chamber while Lumian had mysteriously disappeared, Franca swiftly procured a mirror.
Stains of blood and black splotches marred the mirror's surface.
Puzzled, Jenna inquired, "Why are you employing Mirror Substitution?"
Wouldn't it be more sensible to make another attempt at traversing the hidden door?
With an air of solemnity, Franca explained, "This mirror carries the Mirror Substitution spell I prepared for Ciel prior to our mission. It allows me to cast a reversed curse on Ciel.
"Presently, I'll employ a milder curse to assess if I can establish a

connection with him."
Should she succeed in placing a curse upon Lumian, it would imply the connection remained intact. If the bond hadn't been severed, an alternative resolution had to be pursued!

Chapter 329: Metallic Creature

Simultaneously with Franca's explanation, inky flames emanated from her right hand, melding with the mirror that belonged to Lumian's substitute.

Jenna observed with a mixture of apprehension, her breath held involuntarily.

...

Within the Bottle of Fiction.

Just as the wall of flames surged forth, kindling the Abyss Demon Flowers, a pang of agony gnawed at Lumian's heart, birthing a faint shroud of black flames upon his chest.

In response, his Spirit Body descended gradually, drawn into an abyssal darkness, a void obliterating light.

Curse? Lumian, ensconced within the cradle of crimson flames, was caught off guard.

The reasons behind this unexpected curse eluded him.

On the one hand, he had preemptively plugged his ears, blunting the impact of the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell. On the other, Guillaume Bénet lay concealed among the dormant Abyss Demon Flowers, offering no overt indications of invoking contract abilities. Furthermore, he remained unscathed, leaving behind neither flesh nor blood. Every strand of his discarded hair had been consumed by the encroaching flames.

As the black flames emerged, the curse lingered at a subdued level, manifesting as a faint affliction that refrained from impeding his movements. Instantaneously, Lumian formulated a hypothesis.

This curse came from Franca!

Employing Mirror Substitution, she sought to reach out to him!

With renewed determination, Lumian thrust his hands in the direction of the padre's covert location.

Resounding with crackling, another barrier of crimson flames materialized, fire enveloping the descending Abyss Demon Flowers.

Leveraging this veil to obscure Guillaume Bénet's line of sight, Lumian pivoted and sprinted toward the entryway of the Bottle of Fiction.

His actions and his overt choice resonated with unmistakable clarity, conveying to Guillaume Bénet: *Why should I fight you within your chosen battleground?* If my comrades are barred from entry, I'll venture outside and unite with them!

Emerging from his concealment behind a cluster of Abyss Demon Flowers, Guillaume Bénet radiated a metallic gleam across his exposed skin.

Blazing tongues of fire surged toward him, yet they could only "strip away" a fraction of fabric, unable to sear his flesh.
Through the fiery veil, the Cordu padre bestowed a smile upon Lumian's indistinct figure.
Given the capability to freely traverse the Bottle of Fiction with requisite conditions fulfilled, he had ingeniously laid a trap at the entryway, awaiting Lumian's unwitting ensnarement!
Having assumed a metallic form, his utility was confined to boons involving his body, fate, and three distinct contract abilities untouched by his transformation. Among the latter was:
Shadow Burial!
A black mark on Guillaume Bénet's torso wavered, summoning pallid-white and abyssal-black arms that extended from the encroaching shadows, ensnaring Lumian, mid-sprint toward the entryway.
Lumian, with a forceful stomp, catapulted into the air, seemingly aiming to vault over the eerie appendages emerging from the shadows, seeking sanctuary at the hushed, inky exit.
Behind him, a crimson fireball materialized, poised to detonate at a moment's notice, transmuting into a vessel of obliteration.
Simultaneously, fierce fireballs ignited to his left and right, as if poised to counteract the grasp of the arms.
Guillaume Bénet's metallic visage bore a smile more discernible than before, though it remained deprived of vitality—stern and emotionless.
He anticipated Lumian's imminent leap into the Bottle of Fiction's exit.
The strange arms accompanying the Shadow Burial served as a diversionary tactic, forestalling any suspicions from arising!
It's a pity that I can't use Bone Curse in my metallic state. Otherwise, this would be a good opportunity... Guillaume Bénet hesitated to dispel his Steel Body and deal Lumian another blow.
That way, he wouldn't be able to transform into a metallic creature again anytime soon. The abandoned mine now permeated with anesthetic gas would shortly transform into an inferno. For weak humans lacking godhood, this hostile terrain was untenable. Even Alms Monks could sustain themselves only a brief interval longer.
In the throes of hesitation, Guillaume Bénet ultimately opted to persist with Shadow Burial, permitting the nightmarish arms to continue their relentless encroachment upon Lumian.
With a vigorous leap, Lumian neared the exit of the Bottle of Fiction, almost within grasp.
At that moment, the pitch-black exit—a shadowed orifice devoid of flame—suddenly writhed faintly, akin to a shadowy maw

yearning for sustenance.
Undetected, a suffused aura of "shadow" had enshrouded the secret door's surface, a profundity seemingly imbued with life!
This was a trap Guillaume Bénet had meticulously laid. The mechanism lay dormant during Lumian's initial entrance, solely activating when Lumian attempted exit. This safeguard was devised to preempt Lumian from having any danger premonitions when initially entering the Bottle of Fiction, deterring him from braving its confines.
Lumian perceived the sensation of plummeting into an abyss, the final lifeline eluding his grip.
The deceptively thin veil of darkness coiled, an amalgam of endless shadows that converged into an abyssal maw, an aperture on the verge of engulfing him.
Mid-flight, Lumian extended his right palm, yet just before it made contact with the shadowy maw shrouding the hidden door, he abruptly withdrew it, mimicking a gesture of prying open a door.
In tandem, the Decency brooch nestled upon his right chest emitted a subdued golden glow.
Distortion!
Lumian distorted the action of opening the door with the concept of "unsealing this confined space!"
From the outset, his intent to depart the Bottle of Fiction was absent. Instead, he sought to find a way for his companions to infiltrate, thus furnishing reinforcement.
This enclave laden with combustible resources stood as a haven for a Pyromaniac!
Boom!
With a resounding detonation, the crimson fireball positioned to Lumian's left erupted, issuing a horizontal thrust that exacted a substantial toll. His attire lay rent, and his flesh bore charred imprints, inflicted by the fiery onslaught. Gradually nearing the shadowy vortex, the forceful explosion propelled him away from the exit of the Bottle of Fiction and beyond the enshrouded region brimming with appendages swathed in pallid-white and abyssal-black.
Resounding with a thud, Lumian tumbled, ensconcing himself behind a rampart of surging flames. This maneuver forestalled the further encroachment of the shadowy expanse, obliging the strange arms to contend with the blistering blaze.
Outside the Bottle of Fiction.
A frigid zephyr brushed against Franca and Jenna, wafting from the hidden door's interior.
Swiftly, the chill metamorphosed into a searing fervor. Behind the

hidden door lay a derelict mine engulfed in a sea of crimson flames, the blazing inferno punctuated by the descent of undistorted fire dragons, their incandescence unbridled.
The remaining black vines, the crimson flowers, and the strange arms all succumbed to the fiery onslaught, pursued relentlessly by the raging conflagration.
Signaling to Jenna, Franca receded into the shadows as she drew closer to the hidden door.
Jenna understood Franca's intentions and rationally retreated into the shadows outside the hidden door, concealing herself.
She knew that it would be difficult for her to participate in the battle with her strength. Thus, she chose to bide her time, awaiting the enemy's emergence through the threshold, poised to exploit a fleeting opportunity to deliver a decisive, lethal strike.
Within the ajar Bottle of Fiction, Lumian, having concluded his somersault, propped himself up with a single hand.
Locking his gaze onto the distant Guillaume Bénet—his form akin to that of a metallic marionette—Lumian's lips curled wordlessly, yielding an eruption of crimson flames that engulfed his flesh and attire.
A familiar pang of torment reverberated across Lumian's psyche, jolting him awake from the lethargic stupor.
It's been some time! Lumian's grin was tinged with distortion as he hurtled toward the metal-encased Guillaume Bénet. His forward momentum stirred the encompassing crimson flames, elongating behind him like a shimmering, unfurled cape.
Wary of Lumian's earlier utilization of the harrumph spell, Guillaume Bénet, resembling a puppet forged from steel, evaded direct confrontation, executing artful shifts in position.
Discerning Lumian's strategy of harnessing the flames to stave off the Abyss Demon Flowers-induced anesthetic gas, Guillaume Bénet discerned this endeavor to be fleeting. At best, Lumian's fiery gambit would delay his descent into unconsciousness. Certain matters couldn't be resolved by self-harm!
Having adopted the form of a metallic entity via Steel Body, Guillaume Bénet remained impervious to the anesthetic gas's effects, even forgoing the need to draw breath. This form also minimized the conflagration's impact on him. Guillaume Bénet was convinced that Steel Body's efficacy would persist until Lumian Lee succumbed to unconsciousness.
Furthermore, his assessment revealed Lumian's substantial spirituality expenditure, coupled with Lumian's evident abstention from spirit world traversal.
This deduction led Guillaume Bénet to surmise that the harrumph

spell likely bore limitations on its frequency of use.
Of course, sustained evasion was untenable. Lumian Lee's actions hinted at him using some unconventional means to open the Bottle of Fiction, suggesting his companions had likely infiltrated covertly through invisibility. Guillaume Bénet couldn't allow this duo to demonstrate the potency of their teamwork.
Nimbly maneuvering around the plummeting tendrils of flaming vines, Guillaume Bénet executed a sudden pivot, facing Lumian with unwavering intent.
His metallic countenance mirrored the flaming luminance, refracting a kaleidoscopic iridescence.
Myriads of diminutive "rainbows" coalesced, cleaving Guillaume Bénet as though he gazed upon his mirror image.
Light Incarnation!
One of the three contractual abilities accessible in his Steel Body state.
Its premise lay in leveraging light to forge a fleeting incarnation, capable of channeling an individual's capabilities.
Two metallic Guillaume Bénets surged toward Lumian simultaneously.
Thud! Thud! Thud! Each stride they undertook fostered corporeal expansion, culminating in the metamorphosis into metallic titans, which tore asunder their white robes adorned with silver-black threads.
Elevating his right hand, Lumian summoned into being a host of crimson Fire Ravens that swirled about him.
The Fire Ravens promptly surged toward the two Guillaume Bénets, demonstrating no clemency.
Given the inherent challenge of distinguishing authenticity from imitation within a short span of time, Lumian adopted a stratagem of unleashing an onslaught indiscriminately—comprising both genuine and illusory manifestations!
For truth could not be falsified, nor could falsity be genuine!
In an abrupt detonation, the Guillaume Bénet before him disintegrated.
Rumble!
Accompanied by the explosion, amid which a multitude of Fire Ravens were prematurely engulfed in combustion, a Water Cannon sculpted from dark-green liquid surged forth from the fake Guillaume Bénet's fragmented remnants.
The Water Cannon, of astonishing alacrity and proximity, penetrated Lumian's fiery shroud, impinging upon his form. As a consequence, Lumian's physique began exhibiting telltale signs of liquefaction.

Draynere Gland Poison!
One of three contractual abilities he could use as a metallic entity!
With a brittle crack, Lumian's corporeal structure fractured, metamorphosing into mirrors.
A mere ten meters from Guillaume Bénet, Franca, owing to the activation of Mirror Substitution, involuntarily escaped her state of Invisibility.
Observing her emergence, Guillaume Bénet's blue irises assumed a pallor bordering on translucence. A deft push of his right palm propagated the emergence of an expansive river of mercurial sigils encircling Franca.
Pitting himself directly against Lumian Lee proved to be a disconcerting engagement for Guillaume Bénet. His paramount and most formidable Fate Appropriator ability remained inaccessible, for its utilization would catalyze a consequential backlash from Inevitability.
Since it couldn't be used on Lumian Lee, it could be used on his companion!

Chapter 330: Forewarned is Forearmed

A Fate Appropriator harbored two primary abilities:

Firstly, the capacity to magnify a corresponding fate tributary, thereby setting in stone an imminent destiny for the target. This process could be expeditious, yet its future influence spanned a mere ten seconds. The resulting efficacy was contingent upon environmental compatibility; a more congruent backdrop augmented the probability of the event materializing in the forthcoming future.

Secondly, the ability to swap an accumulated fate for a fragment of the target's own destiny. Absent a premeditated arrangement, one had to either kill the adversary to access their fate or employ their personal fate as a substitute. Relatively more protracted in execution than magnifying an impending fate tributary, this method prohibited one from assailing the target or inducing harm mid-process.

At this moment, Guillaume Bénet, who wasn't fighting one-on-one, clearly didn't want to engage in a fate exchange. His plan was to utilize the current environment and magnify Lumian Lee's female companion's fate tributary of being affected by the Abyss Demon Flower's anesthetic gas to make it a reality.

Of course, as the woman in the black hood hadn't fallen asleep and wouldn't be paralyzed or knocked unconscious for ten seconds, the sole recourse was to expedite the process while steering it toward the most dire outcome.

In a similar vein, this elucidated one of the rationales behind Guillaume Bénet's abstention from interfering with Lumian Lee's fate tributary.

What he refrained from attempting was the exchange of the adversary's fate or the inversion of key tributaries into the principal course, lest he suffered the backlash invoked by Inevitability. He wouldn't have a problem if he only made Lumian Lee slip and fall, achieving futures that wouldn't have significant impact.

The mercurial river encircling Franca was reflected in Guillaume Bénet's lightened eyes. After some discernment, he grabbed at one of the tributaries formed by the mercury symbol that wrapped around itself.

Concurrently, Franca arched her neck, thereby unveiling her supple neck and moist vermilion lips under the hood's shadows.

Peculiarly, a palpable flutter stirred in Guillaume Bénet's chest, reverberating to his nether regions as he recollected scenes of his liaisons with courtesans along Rue de la Muraille. Yet, these

recollections paled in allure compared to the figure opposite him, despite her visage remaining partially veiled.
Despite his momentary lapse, Guillaume Bénet promptly reinstated his focus.
Capitalizing upon this fleeting respite, Franca—enlightened to the general scope of a Fate Appropriator's abilities courtesy of Lumian—sparked latent black flames, engendering frost that enshrouded her form.
Opaque filaments converged, manifesting palpable encasement amid the frigid shroud, akin to a cocoon.
Unperturbed, Guillaume Bénet's lips curled into a smirk, unfazed by the unfolding situation.
If a Fate Appropriator's abilities were so easily rendered ineffectual, they wouldn't be called Fate Appropriators!
Furthermore, as long as the target's fate tributary was magnified or underwent a fate exchange, they wouldn't be able to break free even if they used a substitute.
With measured deliberation, Guillaume Bénet extended his right palm and executed a slight wrist rotation, magnifying a particular fate he had chosen.
Nonetheless, in this precise instant, he perceived the hooded lady's fate river adopting an uncanny semblance of illusory ambiguity, an etherealness so pronounced as to border on feigned fabrication.
A decoy!
Guillaume Bénet's endeavor to augment the fate tributary was abruptly thwarted. The cocoon disintegrated, frost fragmenting and black flames metamorphosing into coruscating beams of light.
Yet, the focus of the protection wasn't Franca herself, but rather, a mirror!
Capitalizing on Guillaume Bénet's momentary bewilderment, a casualty of the Demoness of Pleasure's allure and his self-imposed adverse effects, Franca seized the initiative. Employing Mirror Substitution, she ensconced herself in layers of black flames, frost, and spider silk, confounding the adversary while concealing the real lethal peril.
Thus, she extricated herself from the figurative crosshairs, evading the adversary's targeting.
Simultaneously with the failure of Guillaume Bénet's attempt to amplify the fate tributary, a figure garbed in an Assassin's attire manifested behind him, its visage partially obscured by a classic brass revolver, aimed steadfastly at the enemy's cranium before pulling the trigger.
Bang!

The iron-black round collided with the dodging Guillaume Bénet's head, emitting a distinct metallic clang.
Guillaume Bénet's head, bedecked in a metallic sheen, yielded to the impact, though its structural integrity endured, deflecting a potentially lethal strike.
Nearly in tandem, Lumian, having used Mirror Substitution to evade the effects of Draynere Gland Poison, and draped in flaming clothes, emerged nearby. Dropping to a genuflecting posture, he pressed his palms to the ground.
In response, twin crimson fire serpents surged into being, consuming the incendiary vines while spreading the flames along their trajectory, ultimately converging to form a colossal pair of fire dragons.
Both entities surged toward Guillaume Bénet. However, their purpose wasn't to ingest their quarry, but to intertwine and coalesce, giving rise to an ostentatious and brilliant conflagration-blooming flower.
As the fiery flower unfurled before him, Guillaume Bénet grappled with comprehending Lumian Lee's intentions.
With his Steel Body, his resistance to flames was steadfast for the time being, but the other party wouldn't go as far as wasting an opportunity and do nothing but perform fire magic, right?
This was Bribe!
Lumian had "gifted" Guillaume Bénet with a blazing flower—an emblem signifying incineration and obliteration. Capitalizing on the Decency brooch, he had completed a Bribe, thereby attenuating the adversary's defenses.
Although Lumian Lee's true motives remained opaque, Guillaume Bénet's intuition kindled with the conviction that this augured unfavorably.
In rapid succession, Guillaume Bénet invoked Light Incarnation anew, fragmenting into three iterations as he advanced toward Lumian. As Franca's assault faltered, she vanished anew.
Witnessing the three iterations of the metalized Guillaume Bénet rapidly engorge, Lumian conjured a new cohort of Fire Ravens and distributed them evenly amongst the trio of adversaries.
Then, turning his form and slowing his pace, he primed himself for a prospective evasion of the ensuing Water Cannon conjured from Draynere Gland Poison.
Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! The crimson Fire Ravens landed precisely on the three metalized Guillaume Bénets.
Rumble, rumble, rumble!
They exploded simultaneously!
A torrent of dark-green liquid surged forth from one of Guillaume

Bénet's forms—Water Cannon. Lumian, braced for the assault, deftly evaded, his gaze fixed upon the collision of aqueous impact against the rocky wall, a tremor rippling through the Bottle of Fiction.

Yet, as Lumian's evasion completed, he detected a colossal shadow enshrouding his feet. Thereupon, a medley of pallid-white and obsidian-black arms extended forth from this obscurity.

In contrast, Lumian's other choice of direction was shrouded in a dark shadow.

At Sequence 5, Light Incarnation permitted Guillaume Bénet the creation of up to three incarnations, each incarnation fake. One harbored Draynere Gland Poison, while the other pair wielded Shadow Burial, intent on ensnaring Lumian within their shade-infused grasp.

Curved, grotesque limbs ensnared Lumian's ankles, striving to haul him into the nebulous depths.

Amid this peril, a figure emerged from the inky depths—a half-naked, metallic-finished Guillaume Bénet.

Shadow Burial was a form of shadow concealment for him!

By capitalizing on three Light Incarnations—which consumed a large amount of spirituality—to veil his position, thereby detaining Lumian temporarily, Guillaume Bénet engineered his stealthy approach via the shadows, orchestrating a decisive assault.

His body suddenly expanded as he punched Lumian behind the ear.

A thunderous crack resonated as Lumian's form fragmented akin to a glass pane, fracturing into myriad minuscule fragments subsequently claimed by the pallid-white and obsidian-black arms.

Mirror Substitution!

It was precisely due to the implementation of Mirror Substitution that Franca refrained from intervening on Lumian's behalf when she saw him restrained by the strange arms extending from the shadow. Rather, she bided her time, anticipating Guillaume Bénet's advent to administer a terminal blow.

Amidst the cracking sounds, Franca's hooded, black-robed figure involuntarily appeared once more, quickly spotted by the padre.

Guillaume Bénet had been waiting for this opportunity to stop himself from being affected by the charm and turn his blue eyes light-colored again.

He saw the mercurial river of fate and began to choose the fate of being paralyzed by the burning gasses of the Abyss Demon Flowers.

Yet, an abrupt surge of peril seized Guillaume Bénet's consciousness, compelling a stark realization: interference with

the adversary's fate would undoubtedly yield cataclysmic repercussions.
Impossible! Moments earlier, such consequences hadn't arisen! Yet, as he scrutinized the figure before him, Guillaume Bénet, who had been able to interfere with his target's fate normally previously to near success, saw a hooded woman hiding behind the hooded woman. The woman behind her held a palm-sized mirror that illuminated his figure.
In an instant, Guillaume Bénet understood what was going on.
The hooded woman standing in front of him, revealing the river of fate, was Lumian Lee!
After activating Mirror Substitution, he took the initiative to appear in front of his companion. Seizing the opportunity, he used a Transfiguration-like ability to change his appearance and disguise himself as his companion!
You do realize, using the same trick won't work twice? Franca, who was hiding behind Lumian, chuckled when she saw this.
Seeing Lumian under attack, she took out her teammate's Mirror Substitution and threw it in front of her. Taking advantage of the cover and the enemy's drawn attention, she aimed another mirror at Guillaume Bénet.
Without hesitation, Franca's palm was enveloped in black flames as she swiped the mirror's surface.
Curse!
Demoness's Curse!
In a simultaneous eruption, a quietly smoldering black flame ignited from within Guillaume Bénet's metallic form.
Elated that his Steel Body rendered him impervious to conflagration, inflicting only minor wounds, he soon perceived an anomalous drain on his spirit, coupled with indications of severe ethereal scorching.
In the span of an eye's flutter, the Cordu village padre emitted a tormented cry.
Instantaneously, his metallic semblance plummeted to the earth with a cacophonous clatter, reconstituting into a form unadorned by metal, starkly naked and manifestly fleshy.
At the same time, Franca, too, experienced a visceral tremor, her countenance assuming a pallid hue.
"Rebirth!"
The contract ability in question facilitated Guillaume Bénet's revival within the slayer's body!
Guillaume Bénet's spirit smiled and hastened to replace the woman holding the mirror and take control of her body.
Yet, he confronted a disconcerting reality: before him stood an

enshrouded woman brandishing a mirror, baring her lower visage in a manner reminiscent of malevolent allure.
She's in front... Then whose body did I Rebirth into? A disorienting befuddlement inundated Guillaume Bénet.
Meanwhile, Lumian, ensconced within Franca's semblance, donned a knowing grin, gradually retracting his right palm from the padre's lifeless cadaver, the Decency brooch aglow with a dusky-golden luminescence.
Distortion!
How could he not guard against Guillaume Bénet's Rebirth ability when he already knew that Guillaume Bénet's mistress had chosen such an ability?
Lumian couldn't overtly commandeer Guillaume Bénet's Rebirth with his seal and corruption alone. Nevertheless, Lumian, resembling Franca with uncanny precision, had already instructed Franca to bring the Earth Blood ore.
Innately repellent to even the Montsouris ghost, the Earth Blood ore imposed an unseen force field compelling Guillaume Bénet's Spirit Body's circumvention.
Leveraging the Distortion afforded by the Decency brooch, coupled with the Earth Blood ore's obstructive efficacy and the Niese Face's transformation, Lumian orchestrated Guillaume Bénet's Rebirth within his very body!
Although Lumian's visage paled and his frame quivered slightly, a smile graced his lips as he extended his hand towards his left chest, gently declaring, "Padre, everyone is waiting for you."

Chapter 331: Spirit Channeling

As Lumian's words reverberated, an inexplicable chill settled over Guillaume Bénet, even in his Spirit Body form.

Simultaneously, a peculiar tug gripped him, causing him to involuntarily convolute and plunge towards a specific direction.

There, a colossal, semi-transparent vortex unfurled, ensconced in a wispy gray fog at its nadir. Within this haze materialized a dimly lit village, populated by spectral forms.

One of these apparitions gazed skyward, noticing Guillaume Bénet's struggle against the vortex's inexorable pull.

His pale-white face instantly lit up with excitement and fanaticism as he shouted, "Oh, my deity, my lord, you're here too? "Quickly, join us! Hasten your approach!"

The figure belonged to Guillaume Bénet's brother, Pons Bénet.

Sensing Pons Bénet's abnormality, the figures lingering in the dim village looked up at Guillaume Bénet.

Among them, Madonna Bénet, Philippa Guillaume, and the others, who had once been Guillaume Bénet's mistresses, extended their pale-white arms to the sky and smiled blankly.

"Quickly, join us! Hasten your approach!"

Immediately after, Shepherd Pierre Berry, Lumian's comrade Guillaume Berry, Azéma Lizier, and more added their supplicating gestures.

In an instant, a peculiar, pallid forest seemingly sprouted from within the village's dim enclave, its spectral denizens directing their palms towards the padre.

Guillaume Bénet's descent escalated, his Spirit Body verging on fragmentation.

Struggling to counteract the vortex's pull, he sought to resist its sway, aiming to evade its dominion and flee Lumian's profoundly perilous vessel.

He couldn't care less about the Rebirth in the other party's body and the corresponding fate.

That was something he couldn't bear!

Lumian's grin expanded, seemingly attuned to the cacophony of terror and anguish echoing within his own body.

Indeed, possessing him via Rebirth and forcing a possession by luring others over via the Summoning Dance were completely different treatments!

The former would form a connection with his fate and, in an attempt to replace it, it would inevitably trigger the seal. Guillaume Bénet's profound corruption by Inevitability meant that the resonance of this seal's potency was inevitable.

Though Lumian remained ignorant of the precise ramifications, he intuited they would bode ill.
Perceiving Guillaume Bénet's vehement longing to extricate himself, Lumian opted to refrain from thwarting his escape, willingly relinquishing any interference.
Post-Rebirth, save for scenarios involving specific domains such as Sun, Lumian lacked the capability to forcibly expel an uncooperative Guillaume Bénet from his body. Mirror Substitution, too, proved ineffectual in such a case. However, should Guillaume Bénet yearn to depart, the course of action was rendered straightforward.
Ultimately, Guillaume Bénet—having expended a considerable amount of his spirituality—struggled to escape from Lumian's body.
Precisely then, Lumian deftly rotated his wrist, enlisting Distortion anew.
A dark-golden glimmer traversed his chest, heralding Guillaume Bénet's emergence within the palm-sized mirror clasped in Franca's grasp.
Franca's palm coalesced an unblemished frost, which she spread over the mirror's surface.
Instantaneously, Guillaume Bénet's form became ensconced within a veneer of ice, ensnared within the mirror's confines.
Concurrently, Franca summoned black flames, which enshrouded the icy enclosure.
Though the ice in itself was inadequate to bar a Spirit Body's escape from the mirror, the shrouding black flames bore that capability. Should Guillaume Bénet dare venture beyond the ice's protection, the flames awaited to engulf him.
With Guillaume Bénet's Spirit Body securely sealed, Franca glanced up at Lumian—who had removed the paper balls—and directed, "Channel his spirit after we're out. Your flames and anesthetic gas are everywhere."
With her physique and expenditure, holding on for another two or three minutes sans Mirror Substitution posed no undue challenge. Nonetheless, she sensed Lumian reaching his threshold.
Affirming Franca's directive with a nod, Lumian briskly pivoted and surged towards the Bottle of Fiction's exit.
Consequent to Guillaume Bénet's "demise," the concealed trap had naturally been lifted.
Having returned to the sacrificial hall, Lumian promptly dissipated the Niese Face, reverting his appearance from that of Franca's hooded visage and black robe.
His upper body bore the telltale markings of being charred, yet

owing to his skillful management following the initial digestion of the Pyromaniac potion, his trousers remained unscathed.
This approach, evoking pain, stimulating cerebral activity, and rousing his senses, didn't necessitate subjecting his entire form to incineration—localized scorching proved sufficient.
Observing his somewhat unconventional appearance, Franca—torn between concern and amusement—chimed in with an air of teasing, "Do you have a penchant for masochism? You go through this ordeal every time you engage in combat."
Lumian directed his attention toward the mirror ablaze in Franca's grip and casually responded, "That's how Hunters are."
"I'd be deluding myself if I bought into your fabrications. I'm an Instigator, after all!" Franca had borne witness to prior Pyromaniac skirmishes.
Witnessing their conversational exchange, Jenna deduced that their adversary had been ensnared and the situation had reached its resolution. Thus, she emerged from the concealment of the shadows.
Franca graced her with a smile before turning her attention back to Lumian, relaying, "Hold on for a moment. Don't fret. Guillaume Bénet isn't entirely dead yet. Once the Rebirth effect wanes, he'll morph into a recently expired spirit, his faculties adrift. At that juncture, channeling his spirit will prove less hazardous, and we can be sure he doesn't lie."
Lumian calculated the remaining duration of the Decency brooch's efficacy and remarked, "Let's wait here."
Leveraging the mystical knowledge gleaned from the boon, he discerned that the Rebirth effect endured merely two minutes—its termination was imminent.
Abandoning their current location to embark on a quest for a more secure locale for spirit channeling would necessitate identifying another concealed setting, subjecting Lumian to an additional hour of repulsion before spirit channeling could ensue.
The optimal time frame for spirit channeling would subsequently elapse.
Moreover, Lumian harbored a reluctance to further procrastinate.
Franca nodded in understanding.
Stepping toward the altar, she set the mirror upon the pitch-black ring symbol crafted from thorns, thereby maintaining the enshrouding black flames.
This facilitated Lumian's observation.
Fixated on Guillaume Bénet's pale and ashen visage, ensnared beneath the duality of black flames and ice, Lumian smirked with brilliant satisfaction gradually etched upon his lips. He uttered,

"You're truly foolish!
"If I were you, I'd evade and refrain from launching an assault post Steel Body activation, awaiting the adversary's inevitable fatigue.
"Ah, I neglected to apprise you. My spirituality has plummeted below the safety threshold, thereby making spirit world traversal or even utilization of the Spell of Harrumph impossible. I'm barely able to kindle fire, changing my face, and using the brooch. Should you have bided your time, I would've neared my limit and fainted on the spot.
"I acted rashly and reacted relatively slowly towards the end. On the one hand, I didn't want to expend more spirituality and wanted to save them for critical moments. On the other hand, Mirror Substitution consumed Franca's spirituality. On the other hand, heh heh, it was a trap for you.
"Do you remember the flaming flower? Without this 'gift' to complete Bribe, Franca's curse wouldn't have been able to kill you, a Sequence 5..."
Upon hearing the term Spell of Harrumph and recalling Lumian's actions of knocking out two fake Guillaume Bénets in a row, Franca's eyelids twitched in shock and confusion.
Jenna looked at Lumian, who kept mocking the Spirit Body in the mirror, and tugged at Franca with a measure of concern. She whispered, "Perhaps we should attempt to assuage him?"
"No need." Franca shook her head and took the initiative to distance herself from Lumian, giving him a "private" space to vent.
Jenna tersely acknowledged and followed Franca to the edge of the sacrificial hall, casting a lingering glance at the visage of pallid, pale-white and ashen hues reflected within the mirror.
Guillaume Bénet emanated a mixture of hostility, terror, and ultimately—despair.
...
Dill brothel, sixth floor.
On a distant balcony, Albus positioned himself in a discreet corner, his concealed gaze unwaveringly fixed upon Room 602.
Once Lumian and his companions had seemingly "teleported" away, Albus stepped out from his concealment, a wry smile tugging at his lips.
To think a mere Sequence 7 individual wields an artifact that enables traversal of the spirit world?
His connection with Red Boots isn't simple. Whether Gardner Martin is privy to this or remains in the dark, I wonder...
As he muttered, Albus's smile carried a hint of ambiguity and playful intrigue.
...

50 Rue Vincent, underground sacrificial hall.
Lumian's continuous taunting endured until the Rebirth effect gradually subsided, a shadow darkening Guillaume Bénet's eyes.
Meanwhile, Franca, intently calculating the elapsed time, positioned herself near the altar and erected a wall of spirituality, priming herself for the forthcoming endeavor.
With the moment at hand, she softly intoned the incantation, engaging her self-devised Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell.
Yet, just as success appeared imminent, Lumian summoned the Decency brooch's Distortion once again, rerouting the inquiry of the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell toward himself.
In a final bid for success within a singular attempt, he even invoked the Niese Face, transfiguring into Franca once more.
Almost instantaneously, the mirror's surface dimmed, casting Guillaume Bénet's pale visage into a slightly blurred disposition.
With his capacity to sustain the Niese Face dissipated, Lumian reverted to his original form and shifted his focus back to Guillaume Bénet.
"Who led you to place faith in Inevitability?"
Although Franca harbored a degree of curiosity, she was mindful of the repercussions of Lumian broaching forbidden topics, thus jeopardizing her corruption. Subsequently, she parted the wall of spirituality, positioning herself at a distance from the altar.
Guillaume Bénet, in a somewhat dazed state, responded, "It was Aurore Lee!
"Upon discovering that the faith of an accursed deity was disseminating, she covertly approached me, affirming that I could harness superpowers without supplicating the bishops. Moreover, I was assured of the prospect of obtaining godhood in the future, potentially ascending to the rank of saint and thereby securing eternal life.
"At the time, I remained skeptical. Nevertheless, my curiosity compelled me to withhold judgment. Over time, however, I witnessed her burgeoning might, my reservations gradually subsiding."
After a brief lull, Lumian inquired, his blue gaze intense, "Who influenced Aurore Lee to embrace Inevitability?"
"I don't know." Guillaume Bénet's bewilderment was palpable as he shook his head.
Following a moment of contemplation, Lumian continued his line of questioning, "What profound impression did Aurore Lee leave upon you?"
Guillaume Bénet's countenance shifted, a semblance of recollection mingling with apprehension.

"S-she said that she wasn't Aurore Lee!"

Chapter 332: Sinners

She said she wasn't Aurore Lee? Lumian felt as if a bolt of lightning had struck him, his thoughts freezing in their tracks.

In fact, he could deduce that Aurore Lee wasn't his sister's real name. Someone deliberately settling in a border village wouldn't likely use their true identity. Yet, after almost six years together, he could sense that his sister embraced the name "Aurore Lee." She never spoke of her original identity or her past life in his presence. Moreover, the forged identity documents she possessed seemed increasingly genuine. When she rose to fame as a best-selling author, their authenticity was unquestionable.

Why would she suddenly say that?

And how did it tie into her inexplicable faith in the enigmatic existence known as Inevitability?

A sharp ache throbbed in Lumian's head, jolting him back to reality. Anxiously, he inquired, "Did she mention who she was?"

On the mirror-like surface, no longer shrouded in black flames and frost, Guillaume Bénet, pallid and tinged with a bluish hue, responded with a dazed expression, "She claimed to be Roche Louise Sanson."

I've never heard of such a name... Lumian furrowed his brow and probed further, "Did she mention anything else about this identity?"

Guillaume Bénet shook his head.

"Nothing more."

Lumian pressed his left hand against his temple. After a brief silence, he pressed on, "Was Roche Louise Sanson involved in the plot to sacrifice Cordu in exchange for the arrival of the Inevitability angel?"

Guillaume Bénet appeared to wrestle with himself, but ultimately yielded to the sway of the spirit channeling. His response came forth, candid and unfiltered: "No, that was my doing.

"I was driven by the desire to attain godhood swiftly, to ascend as a saint. Aurore Lee initially approved, only to oppose my plan mere hours later. She was indecisive. Eventually, I chose to conceal my intentions from her and made covert preparations. Later on, she seemed to tacitly endorse our efforts, offering aid during critical junctures. Occasionally, though, she resisted and engaged in acts of destruction, yet she'd quickly relent."

The Aurore you depict almost seems schizophrenic... Lumian found himself clinging to the image of Aurore, yet he couldn't escape the memory of the lizard-like, diaphanous elf emerging from his sister's mouth. He recalled her sporadic awakenings, her

discussions on escaping their predicament.
But even in those moments of "clarity," Aurore's behavior hardly resembled normalcy. She even overlooked the option of summoning Hela's messenger for swift assistance, the most direct solution out of their ordeal.
Lumian shifted the conversation, asking, "When did Aurore begin propagating the faith of Inevitability in Cordu?"
Guillaume Bénet appeared even more muddled than before.
"My initial investigation pointed to around May or June of last year. After that, she paid me a secret visit."
Seems to be consistent with my suspicions... Something must have transpired back then to corrupt Aurore... If she was an original believer in Inevitability, she wouldn't wait five or six years before proselytizing... Lumian's expression flickered with pain, which he quickly suppressed.
"Have you ever come across diaphanous, lizard-like creatures in Cordu?"
"No," Guillaume Bénet answered truthfully.
"Do you have any knowledge of a figure known as the Sufferer in Cordu?" Lumian inquired further.
Guillaume Bénet appeared taken aback.
"I don't know. No."
Lumian's facial muscles twitched involuntarily.
"Have you observed an owl around Aurore?"
"No," Guillaume Bénet negated again.
Lumian continued to pose inquiries regarding the Cordu catastrophe, yet the answers offered were far from satisfactory. Finally, he probed, "Is there a secret organization or a heretical Church associated with Roche Louise Sanson?"
Guillaume Bénet, his pallid countenance increasingly diffused, finally nodded.
"Yes, it's called Sinners. I now hold the position of one of the Sinners' archbishops."
Sinners... The heretical Church which believes in Inevitability? Lumian's intrigue grew as he delved further.
"Who leads the Sinners, and who acts as the intermediary for you?"
"I'm uncertain of the leader's identity, but he's the sole individual among all the sinners who possesses godhood," Guillaume Bénet's hollow voice responded with an eerie timbre. "The individual responsible for my contact is Bouvard Pont-Péro."
Sole individual possessing godhood... *Could it be the Sufferer lurking in my midst?* Lumian's mind raced as he continued his probing.

"How can I establish contact with Bouvard Pont-Péro?"
"It's futile," Guillaume Bénet's ethereal voice replied, a hollowness to its tone. "Upon my demise, he will sense the shift in fate and preemptively erase all traces. Transfiguration is one of the abilities granted through a pact. He can become anything, but he is no longer himself."
Can take on any form, but at the cost of his own identity... Prolonged use of Transfiguration might have driven him to complete madness... Perhaps I can visit the asylum and seek out any patients with similar cognitive impairments... I must be careful with acquiring further contract abilities. If there are only three or four negative effects, that's manageable. However, if the list becomes extensive, it not only invites trouble but also provides enemies with exploitable openings... If the padre had encountered a member of the Bliss Society or a bestowed from the Mother Tree of Desire, he would undoubtedly fall victim easily... Lumian gazed at the altar mirror and posed another question, "Why did the Sinners organization send you to Quartier de la Princesse Rouge?"
Guillaume Bénet's indistinct visage lit up with zealous fervor.
"It satisfies my desires and simultaneously serves as a recruitment ground for believers, all in preparation for the upcoming grand ritual. Only by allowing our lord to tread upon this realm can sinners like us seek redemption and baptism, thus escaping our predetermined fates."
"Did the Sinners organization provide you financial support, or did you amass funds independently?" Lumian aimed to trace the origins of the money for potential leads.
Guillaume Bénet shook his head.
"It's an anonymous deposit from Aurore Lee—no, Roche Louise Sanson. The sum totals 100,000 verl d'or."
"Dammit, you swine!" Lumian cursed.
While he had foreseen this, the realization that the padre had been using Aurore's earnings to support a courtesan and sustain a lavish lifestyle for recruiting heretics ignited a seething anger within Lumian.
Suppressing his emotions, Lumian let out a scornful chuckle and stated, "Did the Sinners organization not provide you Beyonder characteristics? Have you never consumed a potion?"
Otherwise, the padre would have been even more formidable and difficult to deal with.
"Beyonder characteristics of the Seer, Monster, Apprentice, and Marauder pathways that Inevitability's bestowed are compatible with aren't easily acquired. I've been searching for them.
"Given the adverse effects those contracted creatures have on me,

drinking potions from other pathways would undoubtedly lead to a loss of control on the spot."

Fortunately, my current negative effects remain minimal and feeble. If they were more potent, it could jeopardize my ability to ingest Hunter pathway potions in the future... Lumian's spirituality was dwindling, so he capitalized on the moment to pose one final inquiry.

"What are Sequences 6 to 0 of the Inevitability pathway?"

Guillaume Bénet's voice hollowed further.

"Sequence 6 is Ascetic, Sequence 5 is Fate Appropriator, Sequence 4 is Circle Inhabitant, and Sequence 3 is Sufferer. Beyond that, I am unaware."

Ascetic... It seems akin to the advancement of an Alms Monk... *Why didn't Termiboros inform me?* Right; as a victim, He will likely have the Ascetic boon extracted from Him in the future. It's only natural for Him to evade answering related queries. If He remained utterly impassive and too willing to provide an answer, I would have grown wary and suspected a trap... Lumian's gaze lifted slightly, his countenance involuntarily contorting.

"What abilities does an Ascetic possess?"

Guillaume Bénet's voice drifted as he responded, "An Ascetic is defined by endurance, accumulation, and eruption. After accruing one's usual strength within the body, it can be momentarily unleashed during combat, rendering the Ascetic akin to a giant. Accumulating ritualistic processes permits the simplification of certain special rituals, making them applicable in combat."

Akin to a giant... A momentary outburst... Lumian recollected the confrontation between Shepherd Pierre Berry and the investigator, Ryan, along with the metallic giant the padre had morphed into.

Had the metalized Guillaume Bénet not been overly cautious of the Spell of Harrumph and abstained from close-quarter combat, constantly maintaining a safe distance and shifting positions swiftly, thereby thwarting Franca's Psychic Piercing, by amalgamating Steel Body with Ascetic, the padre could have likely outmatched Lumian, who needed to use his spirituality judiciously.

This corroborated Lumian's rationale for disregarding the strange creatures that came with the boon's knowledge and opting to identify a contract target from the spirit world bestiary. If he hadn't, the padre would have been able to determine if the Spell of Harrumph was still at Lumian's disposal and gauging his remaining combat strength. In that scenario, his adversary's battlefield decisions would probably have starkly diverged from the ultimate outcome.

Guillaume Bénet had earlier "shared" details of the simplified ritual.
By enveloping an individual in sheepskin through ritualistic accumulation and intoning the incantation, they could be transmuted into a sheep. A cumbersome and intricate ceremony was unnecessary.
Just as Lumian was on the cusp of inquiring about the abilities of a Sufferer, an acute pang surged through his head, thwarting his continuation.
A pang of disappointment ensued, albeit one he could accept. Had Franca not devised the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell, Lumian wouldn't have been able to amass such a wealth of answers through his line of questioning.
Lumian engaged his Spirit Vision and concluded the spirit channeling. He took deep breaths as Guillaume Bénet's spirit drifted out of the mirror.
Having calmed down, Lumian suddenly extended his right palm, capturing the padre's Spirit Body.
Though his grasp couldn't control the intangible entity, crimson flames surged forth from Lumian's palm, immolating the already fragile spirit of Guillaume Bénet.
Amid the flames, which burned fiercer than the noonday sun, Lumian watched the apparition writhe instinctively, a pained visage etched upon it. A faint smile curved Lumian's lips as he proclaimed, "Praise the Sun!"
Momentarily bewildered, Guillaume Bénet's form swiftly disintegrated within the flames.

Chapter 333: Gains

Lumian's smile gradually softened as he watched the Spirit Body writhing and wailing within the flames.

This was one of the ways the padre died as he had predicted.

Certainly, when he initially ignited the Abyss Demon Flowers, transforming the derelict mine within the Bottle of Fiction into a fiery inferno, he hadn't anticipated Guillaume Bénet's direct incineration.

During that moment, he had relied on his combat instincts and seasoned experience to create an environment that favored his strengths and mitigated his most vulnerable points. The summoning of the Abyss Demon Flowers by the padre had presented an opportunity.

The anesthetic gas produced by the incineration of the Abyss Demon Flowers wasn't his intention. His aim was to battle within an infernal hell.

During that period, his remaining spirituality had been scarce. Nonetheless, a Pyromaniac's resistance to flames significantly outclassed a Fate Appropriator's. Moreover, this resistance was a physical attribute that didn't deplete his spirituality.

As the Bottle of Fiction transformed into a blazing inferno, even the very air could scorch the trachea and lungs. Lumian believed he would ultimately prevail. He could outlast Guillaume Bénet, enduring until the flames extinguished themselves due to lack of fuel.

With his grasp of the Inevitability pathway, and in the absence of unforeseen deviations for Sequence 6 Beyonders, Guillaume Bénet's constitution was merely more robust than that of an ordinary person. His strength lay in his flexibility and tolerance, rather than fire resistance.

Lumian's observations during the Cordu confrontations validated this point. Both Guillaume Bénet and Pierre Berry, individuals who had clearly progressed beyond Sequence 7, exhibited remarkable combat capabilities, albeit lacking commensurate defensive attributes.

Lumian hadn't anticipated the padre contracting the Steel Body ability. This ability possessed pros and cons. On the one hand, it thwarted Lumian's initial plan for an infernal hell. On the other hand, it curtailed the padre's own capabilities, granting Lumian an opportunity to contend more effectively and unseal the entrance to the Bottle of Fiction. This would permit his accomplice to join the fray and offer assistance. Lumian subsequently exploited Guillaume Bénet's determination to eliminate unnecessary

obstructions by dealing with Franca first. He then improvised, crafting a lethal snare.
Amidst the sizzle of burning air, Guillaume Bénet's wailing Spirit Body disintegrated swiftly, gradually dissipating.
With the task accomplished, Lumian pivoted, acknowledging Franca and Jenna with a nod, signifying his completion.
In the ensuing instant, he staggered toward the altar, retrieving the skins of cow, sheep, and dog.
These items were whole, exuding a sinister aura upon closer inspection.
These constituted specialized hides, amassed through the initial half of the Animal Creation Spell ritual, harnessed by leveraging Ascetic powers for accumulation. Upon grasping the corresponding incantation and enveloping individuals and oneself with these skins, the Animal Creation Spell could be executed outright.
Although Lumian hadn't yet deciphered the predetermined incantation for animal creation or its nullification, these obstacles could be surmounted in due course. He could, for instance, detain Paulina, the padre's butler, and others to determine if they possessed such knowledge. Alternatively, he could engage a Cryptologist of the Marauder pathway to decode the incantation. He could even resort to trial and error, applying his knowledge of the Inevitability domain and his comprehension of Guillaume Bénet's persona. Last of all, he could use divination to get any clarity on success.
Thus, these two sheepskins, a single cowhide, and two dogskins held considerable value. Employed judiciously, they could unleash unparalleled effects. Guillaume Bénet had nearly beguiled Lumian previously by adopting the guise of a massive, brown-furred dog, attempting to flee Rue Vincent and sever their destined encounter. However, his fanaticism in Inevitability's boon and his greed due to his contract had overridden reason. This led him to transition from prey to hunter, setting a trap in reverse.
When Lumian's body began to sway as if he had lost his footing, Franca and Jenna lent their support, each helping him bear a share of the cow, sheep, and dog skins.
In that instant, the Bottle of Fiction quaked.
Stripped of Guillaume Bénet's reinforcement and subjected to the infernal hellfire for a duration, it eventually fractured akin to ice, its fragments plunging into the void.
The derelict cavern, encompassed by its confinement, unveiled itself to Lumian and his companions through the secret door. All the Abyss Demon Flowers had been reduced to ashes and strewn across the ground. The flames had exhausted their combustibles,

and bereft of Lumian's spirituality, most had dwindled to cinders. Only select regions persisted with a crimson luminescence, which was waning steadily.
Lumian glanced at Franca and said, "I'll head back to Rue des Blouses Blanches through Underground Trier. Carry the Earth Blood ore as you make your way to the surface."
Once the Decency brooch was removed, Lumian would inevitably be scorned by those around him. Should he retrace his steps, numerous mishaps could befall him. Alternatively, if he didn't remove it, an alert would be triggered within two to three minutes, attracting the attention of nearby official Beyonders or concealed factions.
Given the potential complications involved in carrying the Earth Blood ore into the underground, coupled with the possible difficulties Jenna might encounter upon receiving it, Franca nodded, pursing her lips, and turned toward Jenna. "Follow Ciel. He's at his limit. He might not even stand a chance against a dog."
"If it's the same dog as before, I wouldn't be able to defeat it," Lumian muttered.
As the exit on the opposite side of the abandoned mine remained unobstructed, a frigid gust swept into the sacrificial hall, dispersing the anesthetic gas with the fragmentation of the Bottle of Fiction. Lumian staggered onward, arriving at the charred remains of Guillaume Bénet.
He kicked the body and turned it over, ensuring nothing was concealed within.
Lumian picked up the iron-gray military alcohol flask and advanced toward the abandoned mine's exit. There, he noticed a brown-furred dog skin that no longer bore a sinister aura.
This particular area had avoided incineration, leaving the dog skin intact. Nevertheless, the process of reconstituting the Animal Creation Spell ritual was mandatory. Only through the application of an Ascetic's ability could it regain its status as a Beyonder item.
Beyond the abandoned mine's exit, two objects were propped against the rocky wall.
One comprised a kerosene-lit lantern, while the other was a dark-green canvas backpack favored by adventurers and mercenaries.
Lumian hoisted the backpack, finding it surprisingly weighty. It was almost too heavy to lift.
Curious, Franca crouched down and unfastened the backpack. Within it lay gratifying gold bars, stacks of banknotes, and golden coins.
"Wow!" Franca exclaimed.
So much money? Lumian's initial thought was: Thank goodness,

the padre didn't expend all of Aurore's accrued royalties. This was followed by a rather visceral reaction: F*cking dammit, this man is so sinister!
Evidently, Guillaume Bénet had anticipated the possibility that Paulina and the others might not escape. In such an eventuality, Lumian and his companions could deduce that the padre had chosen an alternate escape route based on the scarce funds carried by these Inevitability believers. Consequently, they would converge on the basement, inadvertently walking into a trap.
"Not too shabby, not at all," Franca remarked, grinning. "While these heretics might not drop characteristics, they do drop other spoils."
Indicating upward with her hand, she continued, "I'm heading back up. Pass me this dog skin."
She relinquished the three ritualistic hides to Jenna and returned to 50 Rue Vincent, clutching Guillaume Bénet's dog skin.
Jenna slung the dark-green canvas bag over her shoulder, gripping the five sinister hides. She observed as Lumian picked up the lantern and kindled it.
After a few strides through the dim tunnel outside the abandoned mine, Lumian promptly removed the Decency brooch and placed it in another military alcohol flask hanging from his waist, sinking it to the bottom of the liquor.
Lumian took a few more steps before suddenly shuddering. He turned around, glancing at Jenna who was trailing behind.
Jenna, clasping the cow, sheep, and dog skins while toting the canvas bag, bore a somber expression, marked by repugnance. She struggled to speak, her voice faltering, "I-I can control myself. Dammit, I won't beat you up!"
Though Lumian was skeptical, he had no choice but to continue his journey.
After seven to eight minutes, he encountered an abandoned tunnel and settled into a corner, awaiting the dissipation of the Decency brooch's adverse effects. He seized the opportunity to rest and recuperate some of his spirituality.
...
The events that transpired at 50 Rue Vincent remained unknown to anyone as Franca methodically erased all evidence and conducted an anti-divination process in the manner befitting a Demoness.
Throughout this endeavor, she combed through every room. Vigilant against potential corruption, she refrained from delving too deeply, though her explorations yielded neither valuable clues nor significant items of interest.

Ultimately, she returned to the parlor on the ground floor, rousing the unconscious impostor Guillaume Bénet.
The imposter Guillaume Bénet gazed at the cloaked figure adorned in a black robe, a brown dog skin clutched within her grasp. For a fleeting moment, he experienced a sensation akin to being trapped within a dream, unable to awaken.
Franca emitted a soft chuckle.
"As you can see, we've killed that devil."
In her eyes, the imposter Guillaume Bénet was no longer identical to the padre. He had become very unfamiliar.
Perhaps this was his true appearance.
"I-I..." The imposter Guillaume Bénet stammered in surprise and elation, "Are you here to aid me?"
"We're Demon Hunters," Franca fabricated. "What else can you tell us about this devil?"
Though her Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell enabled Lumian to glean extensive information from Guillaume Bénet, its reach had limitations. It could not cover every facet. Further inquiry into relevant individuals was imperative to avert the risk of overlooking crucial leads.
The imposter Guillaume Bénet found the shrouded woman before him remarkably affable. He contemplated briefly before responding, "Other than engaging in an affair with my wife and indulging in steak and mutton chops, there's nothing particularly remarkable about that devil.
"Yes... I-it vanishes for one day each week before resurfacing without fanfare."
Disappearing once a week? Franca acknowledged this detail and pursued further inquiries.
Having exhausted the potential for extracting additional information, she smiled and subtly instigated the imposter Guillaume Bénet.
"If I were in your position, I'd hastily depart this location. Your wife is akin to a devil.
"I would relocate any valuable possessions to regions where my identity remains unknown. I'd purchase a new residence, enter a fresh marriage, and embark on a new chapter."
Guillaume Bénet's heartbeat hastened, and his resolve to stand his ground waned.
In the ensuing moment, he observed the woman before him liquefy akin to melting ice.

Chapter 334: Clues

In the abandoned tunnel, Lumian's eyes snapped open.

Unintended slumber had overtaken him, but it also served to rejuvenate his spirituality. At the very least, the pounding in his head had ebbed away, and the searing fire coursing through his veins, organs, and flesh had altogether abated.

Lumian's sight plunged into unadulterated darkness. His hands groped for the lantern that had been snuffed out, and after lighting it, he noticed Jenna. Clad in the guise of a female mercenary, she sat diagonally across from him. She reclined against the tunnel's wall, her gaze affixed to the dark-green canvas backpack and the five ritualistic hides splayed before her.

Sensing the corresponding motion, Jenna looked up at Lumian.

After scrutinizing him for a few seconds, she playfully jested, "Finally, you're no longer as annoying."

Have the negative effects of the Decency brooch been lifted? Lumian instinctively exhaled a sigh of relief.

Jenna's lips curled into a grin as she rose, hoisting the dark green canvas backpack onto her shoulder. She told Lumian, "Earlier, I entertained notions of beating you up and painting your face with dog poop while you slept. But I managed to restrain myself."

"Much appreciated," Lumian said, his gratitude tinged with sarcasm.

With the backpack slung casually over one shoulder, Jenna stooped to gather the five ritualistic hides. Her smile bore an air of leisure as she uttered, "You're welcome."

And with that, she strode toward the tunnel's exit, a smile dancing on her lips.

"Chalk it up to me treating you as a friend?"

You're mocking me again... Lumian grumbled under his breath, picking up the lantern before following suit.

...

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca, now dressed in her usual attire—a blouse and light-colored breeches—awaited Lumian and Jenna's return.

Her eyes traveled over Lumian's scorched upper body, and a grin formed on her lips.

"Jenna didn't take the opportunity to stab you a few times? Decency's negative effects aren't as potent as I'd imagined."

Jenna interjected before Lumian could respond, "For the first half-hour, it was a real struggle. I had to hide outside the tunnel where he was resting. Every few minutes, I checked for potential threats from below ground, the ceiling, or behind the rock walls. But even

then, I seriously contemplated collapsing the tunnel and burying him alive."
That's not what you said just now... Lumian couldn't help but glance at Jenna.
For a moment, he couldn't tell if the Instigator was telling the truth in the abandoned tunnel or if she was telling the truth now.
Franca chuckled and gave Jenna a thumbs-up.
"That couldn't have been easy. You maintained your vigilance, even in a semi-enclosed, deserted tunnel. You anticipated attacks from below, the cave's ceiling, and the very walls surrounding him."
Jenna's brows relaxed, and her smug smile was unmistakable.
"You're always feeding me those horror tales, remember? Like hands emerging from the earth to grab ankles, bloody heads dangling from ceilings, or figures springing from walls to embrace the protagonist."
Every night's entertainment involves retelling horror stories to Jenna? Lumian glanced at Franca, sensing that her intentions might run deeper.
"See? Those stories have their uses!" Franca beamed.
Then she turned her attention to Lumian.
"Need a doctor?"
The burns appeared quite severe.
"No need. For a Pyromaniac, it's merely a minor scrape." Lumian refrained from mentioning that he would be fully recovered by 6 a.m. the following morning. "And if things worsen, I can always seek out Rat."
His nurtured Planter hadn't risen to the ranks of a Sequence 8 Doctor yet, so his assistance was rather limited at the moment.
Observing Lumian's lack of visible discomfort, Franca's concern lessened. She picked up the dark-green canvas backpack Jenna had left on the armchair and prepared to place it on the coffee table to meticulously tally their spoils.
Casually, Lumian pushed aside cups, plates, newspapers, and magazines that cluttered the table, creating enough space.
Glancing around, he noticed the magazine's title: Women.
It was a widely read weekly among middle-class Intisien women, showcasing Trier's latest fashion trends, lifestyle advice, and beauty tips. The Loen Kingdom had its own bootleg version, Ladies Aesthetic.
Lumian raised his head with a smile, and his gaze shifted to Franca, a playful question in his eyes:"Oh, you read such magazines?"
Franca pursed her lips and puffed out her chest in response: "What's wrong with me reading Women?"

After their brief exchange, Franca unzipped the backpack and removed banknotes, coins, and gold bars.
"Roughly 60,000 verl d'or," she assessed after a moment's calculation.
In a little over two months, the padre had managed to deplete 40,000 verl d'or of Aurore's savings. And all that without acquiring Beyonder characteristics or obtaining any mystical items... The more Lumian pondered, the more vexed he grew.
It wasn't that the padre lacked options for mystical items; rather, suitable ones were proving elusive. On the one hand, his status as a heretic warranted caution, limiting his exposure. He didn't frequent many mysticism gatherings, and thus remained ignorant about numerous aspects. On the other hand, his slew of contracted creatures came with many negative repercussions. Several mystical items would be counterproductive or perilous for him. Some might even bring about abrupt, fatal consequences.
Franca pondered for a moment before addressing Lumian and Jenna, "All the gold is Ciel's share. I'll take half of the remaining assets. Jenna, you and Anthony can divide the rest. Let's decide on the distribution once Anthony returns and we see what he's managed to acquire. Does that sound fair?"
This arrangement would allocate around 30,000 verl d'or to Lumian and 15,000 to Franca.
"I'm fine with that," Jenna responded with a hint of concern. "But Anthony still hasn't come back. Dammit, could something have happened to him?"
"If it were anyone else, I might suspect trouble, but Anthony is a Psychiatrist. He's highly skilled in reading people, so falling into a trap is unlikely for him. Plus, he's an experienced information broker. His tracking abilities are on par with mine or Ciel's," Franca explained with a smile. "Most importantly, while waiting for you two, I used Magic Mirror Divination to ensure his safety. Heh, it might actually be a good sign that he's taking so long. It suggests he hasn't lost his target and might have gained something."
"Why do you have to explain so much instead of just saying you checked through divination?" Lumian quipped, finding amusement in the situation.
Franca made a tongue-clicking sound and chuckled.
"You don't get it. This is about not solely relying on divination."
She gestured toward the five ritualistic hides.
"Are those the components for the Animal Creation Spell? Can we use them?"
"At the moment, only I can utilize them," Lumian replied, shaking his head. "And I haven't obtained Guillaume Bénet's preset

incantation yet."
Franca's expression showed a tinge of disappointment as she settled into her recliner.
After a few seconds, her smile returned.
"By the way, I've discreetly informed the authorities using my contacts that a wanted criminal is hiding at 50 Rue Vincent. Once Guillaume Bénet's death is confirmed, we should be eligible for a bounty of around 20,000. Should we stick to our initial plan for distributing that?"
Entrusting this task to Jenna wasn't feasible. It could raise suspicions that Lumian Lee was among the people she associated with.
Anthony Reid, the information broker, was the most suitable choice, but his absence raised concerns. Franca worried that further delays might lead the police to uncover the situation at 50 Rue Vincent before they could claim the bounty.
Once Lumian and Jenna acknowledged the plan without objections, the trio settled in to await Anthony Reid's return.
After a few minutes, the seated Lumian leaned forward, fixing his gaze on Franca and Jenna. In a measured tone, he said, "There's a matter I need your analysis on."
With Aurore's affairs, he often found himself grappling with his emotions and straying from rationality. This was why he wanted to hear perspectives from Franca and Jenna.
One of them shared a connection with Aurore, yet their bond was markedly different from Lumian's deep tie with Aurore. The other had no direct involvement, making their viewpoints invaluable in approaching the situation from diverse angles.
"Sure," both Franca and Jenna responded in unison, adopting a professional demeanor by shifting their postures.
For the first time, Lumian recounted the events in Cordu. While he omitted certain details such as the Inevitability angel and anything related to the dreamscape, he provided an overview of the catastrophe. This encompassed Aurore's unusual behavior, Louis Lund, Madame Pualis, Guillaume Bénet, and the rest.
Franca had some prior knowledge, but Jenna was largely unfamiliar with this narrative. As Lumian spoke, the underground singer of Salle de Bal Brise and apprentice actress at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons found herself transported into a world that seemed both distant and strangely familiar.
While the notion of the Animal Creation Spell was already unnerving, they weren't prepared for concepts like "men giving birth" and "babies scaling walls like birds."
It was madness, utter madness!

Franca's primary concern, however, revolved around Aurore's transformation. She had harbored curiosity about Muggle's death in Cordu but hadn't dared to probe too deeply, fearing it might agitate Lumian.

Franca couldn't believe it when she realized the source of the problem was Aurore. This didn't match her impression of Muggle at all.

Aurore's revelation that she wasn't Aurore Lee in the presence of Guillaume Bénet caught Franca off guard. Her initial surprise morphed into a grave expression.

Soon, Lumian narrated the concluding sacrificial ritual. Aurore's sudden awakening within the altar and her act of shoving him to safety allowed him to survive.

In response to this account, Franca abruptly rose from her seat.

Baffling Lumian and Jenna with her actions, she hurried to her bedroom, returning with a stack of papers in hand.

These were Aurore's grimoires, transcribed by Lumian who harbored a suspicion that something might be awry. He had hoped Franca could offer insights.

The papers were spread across the coffee table, and Franca extracted one sheet, her expression morphing into a blend of trepidation and seriousness. She began, "I think I know what's wrong."

Lumian looked over in surprise and saw that the notebook had a copy of the Warlock spell known as Soul Summoning.

A supplementary spell designed to aid spirits in separating from the flesh or to help Astral Projections find their spirits when adrift in the spirit realm.

Having previously studied the spell structure, Lumian had discerned no problematic elements. It wasn't associated with any evil god.

However, Franca's words carried a weight that demanded attention. Lumian directed his gaze to the spell once more, focusing on the date and its origin.

"April 1, 1357, purchased from the April Fool's Gathering."

Chapter 335: Another World

Lumian withdrew his focus from the grimoire and turned his attention to Franca.

"Is there a problem with that?"

He had meticulously studied the Soul Summoning Spell on numerous occasions. If there had been a problem, he should have uncovered it sooner.

His limitation lay in his inability to learn the spell and discern its ultimate effects. However, as a Pyromaniac, he didn't possess the necessary capacity for such learnings, being incompatible with the corresponding Sequence.

Franca remained silent for a few seconds before speaking up, "What happens when the Soul Summoning Spell is used on others?"

"It enables a spirit to reunite with the body from which it was separated, providing a means to call back Astral Projections lost in the spirit world, thus offering an opportunity for reconnection with their physical forms," Lumian began, describing the spell based on Aurore's grimoire before offering a personal example for clarity. "In the previous battle, if I had been afflicted by Guillaume Bénet's Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell, resulting in severe disorientation, the Soul Summoning Spell might have roused me from unconsciousness. Naturally, the premise here is that there exist Beyonders with the ability to learn and employ this spell."

Franca disregarded Lumian's answer and inquired with gravitas, "What if one were to employ it on oneself?"

What kind of question is that? Lumian pondered for a moment and asked, "It would be ineffective. If no signs of separation between spirit and body are evident, the spell would have no impact when cast on oneself. If there's already a problem resembling such a condition, then one wouldn't be able to employ any spells at all."

"But what if, hypothetically..." Franca began before her words trailed off.

Jenna, observant and quick-witted, glanced at Franca, then at Lumian before rising from her seat and flashing a smile.

"We've been engrossed in discussion for quite a while. Aren't you both feeling hungry? How about I get some afternoon tea?"

"Sure," Lumian agreed on Franca's behalf.

He sensed that Franca was on the brink of revealing something that might be problematic if Jenna caught wind of it. This was why she stopped short in the midst of speaking.

Lumian had already contemplated introducing Jenna to Mr. Fool's

faith. They were comrades now, destined for numerous joint endeavors. In such scenarios, certain secrets couldn't be concealed, and in constantly doing so, would inevitably hinder collaboration.

As for whether to share information about the Tarot Club and Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Lumian hadn't reached a conclusion.

After careful consideration, he determined that preaching to Jenna would be more fitting once she became a Witch. Her Sequence was still too low, and she lacked the strength to shoulder the weight of such knowledge. Too much information could make her vulnerable and inadvertently divulge secrets. However, Sequence 7 Witches of the Assassin pathway represented a qualitative transformation below the demigod tier, empowering Jenna to fend for herself.

While Lumian remained unfamiliar with the Sequence 5 of this particular pathway—its name and the Beyonder powers it encompassed—he believed that a Sequence 6 Demoness of Pleasure didn't manifest a drastic metamorphosis compared to a Witch. The latter could even alter an individual's gender, illustrating the considerable gap in their capabilities.

Franca's gaze followed Jenna's retreating figure until the sound of her gradually fading footsteps reached her ears. She settled into a cross-legged position on the recliner, emitting a soft sigh.

"It's not that Jenna couldn't know about this, but I'm concerned that it might make her fearful of me, that she'll distance herself and view me in a different way."

Lumian didn't pose the question: "Aren't you worried I might react similarly?" He retook his seat, patience etched on his features as he awaited Franca's explanation about the Soul Summoning Spell.

Franca's lips pursed, her demeanor wavering between hesitation and apprehension. After a beat, she chuckled self-mockingly.

"It's also why I sensed a dangerous aura in this matter—otherwise, I wouldn't have even thought about sharing this with you. I would have kept it to my grave. Uh, there's another reason too—your Spell of Harrumph's origins are of great significance to me. I hope you'll lay bare all the details with me, just as I'm about to disclose my secret to you.

"Sigh, we, members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, share one commonality—we all come from another world!"

With that, Franca slouched further into the recliner, seemingly drained of energy.

Observing a Demoness of Pleasure adopt such a posture inadvertently fueled a subtle warmth within Lumian, despite his thoughts being directed elsewhere.

"Another world?" Lumian echoed, genuine surprise coloring his voice.
This was an outcome that hadn't even crossed his mind.
Such a possibility was one that ordinary individuals would scarcely contemplate and a rarity even within the confines of fiction.
In a fleeting moment, he sensed an odd alignment with this notion.
With a conscious effort to rein in his emotions, he inquired thoughtfully, "Is this the 'home' my sister often speaks of—the place she claims she can never return to?"
Initially, Lumian had surmised that his sister's homeland had been ravaged by conflict or catastrophe, hence her assertion of being unable to return. Otherwise, armed with her Warlock strength, she could have surreptitiously revisited, even if she was being pursued by the entire world.
Subsequently, Lumian discovered Aurore's status as a Trierien, causing him to find her references to an enigmatic "home" perplexing.
Franca's expression shifted into one of complex emotions upon hearing Lumian's question. Her countenance was a blend of wistfulness, melancholy, and sorrow.
"Does she frequently speak of 'home'?" Franca inquired, her eyes briefly shuttered to mask the shifting emotions within.
Without awaiting Lumian's reply, Franca's lips pursed, and she continued, "Think of it as another planet or alternate dimension."
Lumian dipped into his memories, muttering to himself, "No wonder she enjoys climbing up to the rooftop to gaze at the cosmos..."
"The cosmos..." Franca echoed with a sigh.
A hushed ambiance enshrouded Apartment 601 as Lumian and Franca delved into their introspective reveries.
After a pause, a memory resurfaced within Lumian's mind.
Madam Magician had mentioned evil gods like the Mother Tree of Desire existing outside our world, separated by a barrier. These entities perpetually seek methods to breach that boundary.
Lumian's gaze shifted toward Franca, and he voiced his thoughts, "Could it be that all of you are spawn of an evil god released into this world?"
"Pfft!" Franca immediately shook off her contemplative state. "Do we look anything like that to you?"
"No," Lumian responded after a brief pondering, "You're far too weak for the efforts of the evil gods to be expended in sending you here. They could have instead focused on sending more of Their

saints. Or perhaps They are pinning Their hopes on your potential growth?"
After all, being weak had its own advantages. Infiltration through the barrier would be less likely to be detected.
Amused and slightly annoyed, Franca was tempted to refute his words, but tangible evidence eluded her grasp, leaving her with little recourse.
"In any case, I've come to believe in Mr. Fool. Not one member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society whom I've encountered shares faith in an evil god."
"Even if they did, they might not reveal it to you..." Lumian muttered.
Franca ignored his comment and continued, "I also remain uncertain about the why behind our transmigration. I've been seeking an answer for quite some time. What I do know is that we arrived in this world as spirits and found ourselves reborn within other individuals' bodies. It's comparable to Guillaume Bénet's process of Rebirth."
Drawing on this analogy, Lumian effortlessly comprehended the situation of Franca and her companions in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.
"In other words, you inhabit the bodies of other people?"
"Yes." Franca cast a sidelong glance at Lumian, remarking, "Are you disheartened to learn that the sister you hold dear is essentially a wandering spirit occupying another's body?"
"Why would I be disheartened?" Lumian responded casually. "Aurore Lee, the person who took me in and shared my life in Cordu for nearly six years, is my sister. I care not for the past of that body or its history."
Franca seemed to seek Lumian's perspective on her own behalf, "Don't you find this situation morally dubious? Do you not consider your sister and me as thieves who appropriate the corpses and lives of others? Does this not present you with moral dilemmas or conflicts?"
"I have no morals," Lumian replied calmly.
Expanding upon his statement, he added, "I show kindness to those who are kind to me."
Franca's mouth slightly agape, she struggled to find an immediate rejoinder.
Lumian glanced at her and said, "That person is already deceased. It's a pragmatic use of available resources. If guilt weighs on you, treat her—no, his family well. Perhaps even fulfill some of his unfulfilled desires."
"True." Franca pressed her lips together, nodding in agreement.

Steering the conversation back to its initial trajectory, she inquired, "What might occur if individuals like us were to employ the Soul Summoning Spell on ourselves?"
"Could it summon a departed spirit? And if there's an underlying issue with the spirit itself..." Lumian's train of thought expanded abruptly.
Simultaneously, he recalled a line of inquiry introduced by Madame Hela, the vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.
"Muggle's parents and other relatives likely remain alive in this world. For some reason, she distanced herself from them and refrains from returning to Trier. It's unclear whether there's something amiss with them or if they've come into contact with heretics..."
Did Madame Hela already harbor suspicions? Lumian's brows furrowed as he whispered,
"Could Roche Louise Sanson be the original boyd's spirit? Is she and some of her family members associated with Inevitability, perhaps even linked to the Sinners organization?"
"Continuing our investigation in that direction is indeed a possibility," Franca admitted after a moment's contemplation. "Two other questions arise. Why did Muggle resort to the Soul Summoning Spell for herself? Did the April Fool's member who sold her the spell foresee this outcome?"
Franca had chosen to share the secret of their transmigration with Lumian, sensing that something might be awry within the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and discerning an impending threat.
Lumian offered a subdued nod, his expression void of emotion. A subtle smile played upon his lips as he ventured, "You mentioned that April Fool's Day was formed by members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society who are disheartened by the future and seek only joy. Could it be that the individual who sold Aurore the Soul Summoning Spell hoped to experience such amusement?"
Franca fell into a brief contemplative silence before replying, "I don't know. I'll take charge of locating the April Fool's member and delve into their motivations."
Lumian offered a curt acknowledgment. "I'll follow the trail of Roche Louise Sanson."
With the conversation surrounding the Soul Summoning Spell concluded, an interim quiet settled within the living room of Apartment 601.
After a pause, Franca exhaled softly and told Lumian, "You can now tell me about the Spell of Harrumph."

Chapter 336: Armored Shadow's Origins

Lumian shifted his focus away from thoughts of Roche Louise Sanson, the Soul Summoning Spell, and April Fool's. He began recounting the tale from the very beginning, all at the behest of Franca.

"In the wake of the Cordu disaster, I found myself tainted by the corruption of the evil god, Inevitability. Fortunately, the protection granted to me by Mr. Fool allowed me to retain my sanity, preventing me from transforming into a monster.

"This corruption, a curse and yet a blessing, is now being extracted in stages, as per the instructions of Madam Magician. The aim is to channel this corruption into my own power, finding equilibrium with the corresponding Sequence Beyonder characteristic."

Franca was enlightened.

"So, what you were referring to as a 'special contract' is essentially the power of a Contractee? No wonder you mentioned it's impossible for me to learn it."

Since Lumian didn't know the powers of a Sequence 6 of the Inevitability pathway, she deduced his current state as a dual Sequence 7 Pyromaniac and Contractee.

Lumian nodded.

"That's why Guillaume Bénet doesn't dare to meddle with my fate recklessly. The degree of corruption within me is rather substantial."

A sudden revelation crossed Franca's mind. "To require Mr. Fool's safeguard, it means there must be godhood involved. Could there be a chance for me to receive similar boons?"

Do you want to give everything a shot? Lumian clicked his tongue and asked, "Are you prepared to seek out the Great Mother, engaging in daily cycles of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding? Alternatively, do you wish to put faith in the Mother Tree of Desire and drag stray dogs to bed?"

"Hiss..." Franca gasped and said, "I was merely musing. Engaging in the risky business of following an evil god is out of the question for me. The immediacy of gaining Mr. Fool's protection by merely brushing against the power of an evil god, much like you, is a rarity indeed."

"This isn't a mere brush against power." To dispel Franca's unrealistic thoughts, Lumian divulged a little more. "The power of Inevitability is sealed within me. In essence, I beseech Mr. Fool and the corruption within me, for a boon instead of the entity known as Inevitability. This approach is pivotal for ensuring my very

survival. Otherwise, I risk becoming unrecognizable or just dying abruptly."
Franca instinctively exhaled and said, "Just tell me about the Spell of Harrumph."
Lumian restructured his narrative, stating, "To prevent any indirect influences from Inevitability, I gave up the strange creatures that accompanied the knowledge bestowed by the boon. Instead, I obtained a wealth of information about creatures from the spirit world through Madam Magician. You know the rest.
"The Spell of Harrumph originates from a creature of the spirit world that I summoned. Initially, I aimed to summon the Shadow of Shriek. However, whether due to my invocation being witnessed by Mr. Fool or my summoning incantation lacking precision, I can't say for certain, but the entity I summoned greatly diverged from the description of the Shadow of Shriek..."
Lumian delineated the relevant summoning incantation, the concept driving its formulation, the Armored Shadow's visual attributes, and its array of capabilities, all in meticulous detail. He even used his barely-passable drawing skills to illustrate a rudimentary schematic.
Fish Scale Armor... Spell of Harrumph... Night Parade of Ten Thousand Demons... Soul Devouring Scream... Franca softly uttered these names to herself while gazing at the sketch on the coffee table, her gaze seemingly distant.
Lumian probed, "Is there an issue?"
Were Aurore present, would she also react in a similar fashion?
Franca snapped back to the present, her expression a blend of solemnity and exhilaration.
"That Armored Shadow might very well be from our world!"
"The world that you guys come from?" Lumian hadn't expected such an answer.
Yet, it made sense. The armor's design and the ability names bore a distinctive uniqueness, setting them apart from the present world.
Franca confirmed tersely.
"There are many countries in our world, and the culture and language of each country are different. The Armored Shadow is very similar to some entity in the myths and legends of the country your sister and I hail from."
"Are you from the same country as Aurore?" Lumian was most concerned about this.
He paused a beat before continuing, "Did Mr. Fool's might, combined with my imprecise incantation, summon the Armored Shadow from your world? Or did he transmigrate long ago, much

like you, eventually transforming into a spirit world shadow after his demise?"
Franca said excitedly, "If it's the former, it could signify a bridge between our two worlds. This implies the potential for our return! If it's the latter, the question arises: how did he use the capabilities of our original world? Did he bring these skills along, or did he acquire them at a later time?"
Resolving these mysteries would inch her closer to the truth of transmigration, potentially paving the path back home!
Franca rose from her seat, her eyes gleaming with intrigue as she faced Lumian.
"Can you summon the Armored Shadow? I'm keen to witness it firsthand."
"I have a pact with him. The need to invoke Mr. Fool's intervention is eliminated for precise summoning," Lumian observed Franca's evident enthusiasm, as though she was readying to assist in setting up the altar. Steering the conversation, he added, "Nonetheless, I perceive him to be immensely dangerous. While under Mr. Fool's aegis, the danger is mitigated. However, if that protection wanes, we could well find ourselves killed by the shadow. Yet, should we remain sheltered by Mr. Fool, direct communication remains an impossibility, precluding spirit channeling. We can solely execute the summoning rite."
Franca frowned in disappointment.
"What's our course of action then?"
Lumian pondered for a moment and said, "Wait till I gather 100,000 verl d'or worth of gold and fulfill the contract.
"By doing so, the pact's power shall act as our shield, enabling us to figure out why the Armored Shadow demands such a substantial sum."
After a thoughtful pause that spanned nearly a minute, Franca finally exhaled.
"That's all we can do for now."
Initially, her intention had been to promptly corroborate the situation concerning the Armored Shadow and extract pertinent insights from it. Subsequently, she planned to inform the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, pooling their collective effort to unearth viable solutions. However, for the time being, she had no choice but to defer these actions.
After a period of immersion in the summoning incantation, it became evident that Franca's success rate in summoning was rather low, presumably due to an imprecise methodology. While it was possible that a Shadow of Shriek could be summoned, Lumian surmised that by omitting a particular descriptive line and using

"Lumian Lee's contracted creature," the target could be pinpointed more precisely.
After a while, Jenna returned with a spread of coffee, treats, and meatloaf. The ravenous appetites that had ensued from their prior battle now found their solace in afternoon tea.
As evening approached, Anthony Reid, masquerading as a clerk, made his return to Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
"How did it go?" Lumian's concern was evident, unabashedly displayed.
With his weathered top hat set aside, Anthony nodded slightly.
"I trailed the lady, her butler, valet, maid, and carriage driver to 20 Rue de la Terrasse, within the library district.
"It appears to be an alternate residence of sorts, akin to a safe house."
Franca turned her gaze towards Lumian, inquiring, "Should we maintain surveillance?"
Lumian ruminated for a beat and then grinned.
"No need. Periodic checks to ensure they haven't left will suffice."
"Why?" Jenna had expected Ciel to rush to deal with them to gather more information.
Lumian's smile was radiant.
"Behind them stands an organization known as the Sinners. Their point of contact is likely aware of Guillaume Bénet's demise, prompting them to disengage and erase any traces, making investigation thorny.
"Yet, if the Sinners find that they had managed to evade our pursuit and that there's no surveillance, what might come to pass?
"Perhaps a connection will be reestablished!
"Only authentic non-surveillance can convince the Sinners that the issue has faded. They could then become active anew, crawling out from their rat's nest!"
Dammit... Jenna cursed silently.
Ciel is so sinister!
Anthony, having garnered significant intel, claimed two-thirds of the final 15,000 verl d'or, leaving Jenna with a share of 5,000.
As banknotes were deftly stowed away within assorted pockets, Anthony Reid turned his attention to Lumian.
"I'm eager to delve into the secrets surrounding Hugues Artois and the truth behind his treachery. I hope to begin the investigation soon."
This was the primary reason for his involvement in the operation.
"Very well." Lumian had already discussed this matter with Jenna and Franca.
Jenna was set to glean relevant details from the Purifiers.

As Franca was highly excited about the Armored Shadow matter, she took the initiative to suggest,
"I have acquaintances from Loen. I'll see if I can obtain a battle record from the Loen military. It might shed new light on the situation."
"That's a good idea." Anthony Reid's eyes lit up.
The notion of soliciting the truth directly from the attacker had not previously crossed his mind.
...
On Rue Anarchie's forever-bustling nights, Lumian, relinquishing the task of divining the incantations to Franca, walked towards Auberge du Coq Doré. There, his intent was to summon the messenger of Madam Magician, intending to relay matters regarding Guillaume Bénet, the Sinners organization, and the Armored Shadow. Concurrently, he hoped she could relay to Madam Justice and Madam Susie his readiness for their final therapy session.
Under the cool embrace of the night breeze, Lumian's thoughts unfurled languidly.
After learning from Franca about the shared trait among members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Lumian's impression of Aurore crystallized.
Of course, the vagueness was something he didn't understand at first, but he deemed it of little consequence. Investigations were unwarranted.
It's no wonder that Aurore severed her familial ties to reside in Cordu, a frontier village. It's no wonder that she harbors a disinclination towards Trier. It's no wonder she always says strange words and likes to explain to me what they mean. It's no wonder her novels were different from the contemporary ones. It's no wonder she likes to say 'a certain philosopher from home once said' only to substitute it with 'Emperor Roselle once said'...
Lumian ruminated in a wordless, contemplative cadence, a sensation of calm washing over him, as if he wasn't strolling on Rue Anarchie but Cordu.
It was a place he could never return to.
Simultaneously, Lumian gained an understanding of the symbolic elements in the dream.
Aurore's acquisition of the land previously occupied by a deceased Warlock—could this embody her possession of Roche Louise Sanson's body?
Consequently, might the legendary Warlock, Roche Louise Sanson, symbolize the original adherents of Inevitability?
Mr. Poet failed to interpret the dual symbolic meanings because he

lacked crucial information previously. He had solely indicated to Lumian that they likely bore their own significance.
As his thoughts raced, Lumian returned to Room 207 and saw a simple folded letter on the table.
Letter? This doesn't seem like Madam Magician's... Lumian walked over, alarmed and suspicious. He picked up the letter and unfolded it.
Two lines of elegant Intisian script graced the parchment:
"I have arrived in Trier.
"Hela."

Chapter 337: Magician´s Speculation

Madame Hela has arrived in Trier? Lumian held the letter with a countenance etched in complexity.

In essence, nothing seemed awry about this development. After all, the vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, codenamed Hela, had alluded to her impending visit to Trier beforehand. However, Lumian's introduction to Roche Louise Sanson had occurred merely that afternoon, sparking suspicions of Aurore's original body harboring beliefs in Inevitability and hinting at a potential anomaly within the April Fool's team. Strikingly, this very evening saw the arrival of this woman in Trier, soliciting a meeting.

She had advised Lumian to keep a vigilant watch over Muggle's familial roots, surmising it to be a promising avenue of investigation.

Sheer coincidence, or is there another reason? Lumian pondered briefly before easing into his seat. Beneath the carbide lamp's glow, he set pen to paper, commencing correspondence with Madam Magician.

In succinct prose, he relayed the day's occurrences, his discourse with Franca, and the conundrum of the Armored Shadow. While he withheld no mention of Hela's arrival, he refrained from disclosing the fact that the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's members hailed from an alternate world.

Approximately half an hour later, Lumian received a response from Magician:

"Giving up on the creature accompanying the boon and autonomously choosing a contract partner from the spirit world was a prudent choice. Your transition into an Inevitability Hunter, with the bestowed of the Inevitability pathway as your objective, proves that my subtle guidance bore fruit after all."

At this point, Lumian was a little puzzled.

When had Madam Magician ever hinted at forgoing the strange creatures that came with the boon?

Suddenly, a realization surged forth.

Before praying for a Contractee boon, unaware that the mystical knowledge it brought would encompass contract targets, Madam Magician had offered him information on creatures from the spirit world for his consideration.

It was indeed a hint, but did it have to be so subtle? Lumian mused that those skilled in divination or enamored with astromancy seemed averse to straightforward elucidation. Instead, they favored dropping crumbs of insight or weaving riddles

imperceptible to others.
After figuring this out, Lumian lowered his head and resumed poring over Madam Magician's response.
"Sinners, a secret organization that venerates Inevitability, has been around for more than six years. Its origins can be traced back to the closing stages of the Loen Kingdom, the Feysac Empire, and the Intis Republic's war. Roche Louise Sanson, the name you mentioned, might have been an adherent of Inevitability, though perhaps not granted its corresponding boons. In sum, that war provided evil gods more crevices for invading our world.
"You've likely discerned the close connection between Roche Louise Sanson and your sister Aurore. To a certain extent, they're one, yet not wholly distinct personas. Much like the Rebirth ability, your sister carried a prior background, resurrecting within the departed body of Roche Louise Sanson. According to the normative progression, your sister should've taken such a path:
"Integration of Roche's memories and sentiments→internal conflict→a prelude to dissociative identity disorder→self-harmony→embracing a fresh existence.
"If self-reconciliation fell short, engaging a genuine Psychiatrist was requisite.
"Judging by your sister's behavior during the first five years, even if her self-harmony remained incomplete, she fared reasonably well. Likely, her disquiet was manageable. Yet, she found Roche's association with an evil god unacceptable. This unresolved matter provided an opening for the Soul Summoning Spell.
"Just as you're puzzled, why would she want to use the Soul Summoning Spell on herself? It's a crucial question...
"I suspect that Sinners is not only the secret organization's name, but also a Sequence 2 or Sequence 1 of the Inevitability pathway.
"The entity known as Inevitability does have authority over the past, present, and future. You glimpsed this in your dream, did you not? Sinners of the past and Sufferers of the present, do they not harmonize splendidly? But what befits the future?"
Sinners of the past, Sufferers of the present... I wonder if Termiboros signifies the past or the future... Yes, Madam Magician's guess is similar to Franca's, but she doesn't seem to agree that it's purely the resurgence of a wraith. It rather appears a fusion of dissociative identity and lingering spirit... Lumian meticulously pondered the message's depictions, wary of omitting any hints.
He was relatively calm now. Be it the real Roche Louise Sanson's revival or Aurore's dissociative identity and the vestige of spirit unveiled through the Soul Summoning Spell, he could embrace

either without much hardship.
One was an evil person doing evil deeds, and the other was his sister being sick—what was so unacceptable?
Lumian released a deliberate, slow breath, shifting his gaze towards the letter behind.
"The Armored Shadow problem is very complicated. Neither you nor the Two of Cups should be privy to the specifics at this juncture. In fact, prior to your summoning of such a shadow, I'd only heard of analogous entities from Mr. Hanged Man. He's come across them only three or four times, one instance even within a dream.
"In the future, as you summon the Armored Shadow again and fulfill your commitment, remember to write to me and inform me of any noted changes."
Mr. Hanged Man... The holder of the Hanged Man card in the Tarot Club? Responsible for addressing the problem with the other world? Lumian's mind engaged earnestly, realizing Madam Magician's implicit message: This entails a matter of high caliber. Details are beyond your grasp for now, but you can investigate and follow leads within your capabilities.
This implies the Tarot Club's vested interest in the world represented by the Armored Shadow... Lumian tacitly nodded, his focus returning to the remnants of the letter.
"I'll notify you when the timing for the final psychiatric treatment is confirmed...
"Your mystical item should be ready within the upcoming week...
"Meet Hela. No glaring concerns on my end. You might even hint that Aurore's anomaly might have stemmed from the sale of the Soul Summoning Spell by an April Fool's member, gauging her reaction. As for telling her about the Armored Shadow, it's up to you and the Two of Cups."
Lumian lightly brushed his fingertips, causing the crimson flames to set the letter alight.
After completing this task, he composed a response to Hela.
"Honorable Madame Hela, if it suits you, let's meet tomorrow at 10 a.m. at Quartier de l'Observatoire's Little Cow Café on Rue Ancienne."
Lumian had initially planned to choose a meeting spot in the market district he knew well. But the risk of the Iron and Blood Cross Order spotting him with a stranger was too high.
His second option was to pick a café or beer house near a cathedral. However, he felt that this might come off as overly cautious. It would seem as if he could seek refuge in the cathedral if anything went awry. But the truth was, he didn't dare to hide

there.
In the end, he settled on Rue Ancienne, the street where Salle de Bal Unique was situated.
When the time came, if there was something amiss with Hela, he would draw the danger to the dance hall that set his nerves on edge. He wanted to see if he could manipulate the troublemakers into turning against each other.
After receiving Hela's response and confirming the time and place, Lumian returned to Rue des Blouses Blanches with the Earth Blood ore. He knocked on Franca and Jenna's door once more.
Franca was still dressed in her usual attire, not having changed into her nightwear. She looked at Lumian with a puzzled expression and asked, "Why are you here again?"
Instead of answering, Lumian inquired, "Where's Jenna?"
"Why do you need to know? She received a payment from you and left to visit her brother," Franca replied, sensing that Lumian had serious matters to discuss.
Only then did Lumian bring up his meeting with Hela the next day. Finally, he posed the question, "Should I mention Armored Shadow?"
"Not yet. We'll wait until we have a clearer picture," Franca said after careful consideration. "For now, don't mention me. Act as if we've never met."
A chuckle escaped Lumian's lips. "You're suspicious of everyone."
"It's better to be cautious," Franca sighed. "The Soul Summoning Spell has made me excessively vigilant."
Once the details were confirmed, Lumian glanced at Franca. "Are you heading out?"
"Yes, I'm going to Rue des Fontaines to find Gardner," Franca replied openly, a mischievous grin on her face. "I'm going to introduce him to some real pleasure."
Lumian was momentarily speechless.
Franca let out a soft laugh.
"I don't have much of a choice. Since neither you nor Jenna are helping me, I need to find someone else to share in the pleasure."
Without waiting for Lumian's response, she added with a smile, "I'll also tell Gardner that I took part in your operation against your enemy at Jenna's request, and that I received a substantial share of the spoils."
Lumian was surprised. "I thought you'd keep it a secret from him."
Franca chuckled and explained, "That guy is actually a very suspicious person. In most cases, telling him the truth works better than keeping things from him."
As Lumian nodded in agreement, Franca recalled something.

"The ritualistic incantations have been divined. The dispelling incantation is 'His Grace,' and the usage incantations are 'Cow,' 'Sheep,' and 'Dog.' It depends on the type of hide used. Everything's in Hermes."

With that, the Demoness waved her hand and left with a joyful demeanor.

The dispelling incantation is 'His Grace'... The padre sure has a taste for power... Lumian entered Apartment 601, grabbed the five ritualistic hides, and made his way to his safe house.

Of course, he didn't forget to lock the door for Franca.

...

The following morning, on Rue Ancienne, Quartier de l'Observatoire.

Lumian walked among the vintage buildings, realizing that Salle de Bal Unique and the Alone bar remained closed at this hour.

Ding ding ding. A postman pedaled by in a blue floral coat.

Lumian diverted his gaze from the firmly shut door of Salle de Bal Unique and continued his stroll, heading towards the café named Little Cow.

Chapter 338: Hela

Little Cow Café served the working-class folks of the nearby streets, offering them affordable breakfast and lunch options. Even amidst the bustling night market, patrons could enjoy a hearty and satisfying meal for just 1 verl d'or. Many individuals with modest incomes, such as motel attendants, restaurant handymen, and cleaning staff earning between 60 to 80 verl d'or per month, frequented the café either alone or with their families every couple of weeks to treat themselves.

When Lumian finally arrived, the bustling breakfast rush had subsided. The café had only a handful of customers, and the staff seemed somewhat fatigued, lacking any enthusiasm.

After placing an order for a cup of Macael coffee brewed from ground coffee beans, Lumian settled into the designated spot, patiently awaiting Hela's arrival.

As the cuckoo wall clock in the café struck the hour, a woman pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Clad in an intriguing black dress, she emitted an enigmatic allure, reminiscent of the attire one might expect from a widow.

Upon spotting the woman approaching, Lumian straightened up and scrutinized her intently.

Her skin possessed an unnaturally pale complexion, as though she had been shielded from sunlight for an extended period. Light golden hair cascaded naturally over her shoulders, soft yet lacking in luster. Her eyes seemed to absorb all available light, rendering them dark and impervious to revealing their true color. Though her facial features were rather attractive, they didn't leave a distinct impression on Lumian. It was almost as though her cold demeanor had cast a shadow, preventing him from forming a complete assessment.

Her icy demeanor didn't merely create distance; it seemed to emanate from within her, causing the ambient temperature to dip slightly.

Before Lumian could discern more details, the woman seated herself across from him and inquired in a chilly tone, "Muggle's brother?"

Although Lumian had already surmised that this was Madame Hela, her directness caught him slightly off guard.

He hadn't expected her to appear without any attempt at disguise, seemingly unconcerned about potential betrayal.

Lumian didn't use the Niese Face or the Mystery Prying Glasses, but he usually employed basic disguises. Relying on his distinctive golden-black hair and simple makeup, he maintained enough

divergence from the Lumian Lee depicted in the wanted posters.
Perhaps this is a form of disguise that I can't detect... Lumian offered a polite smile and nodded. "Madame Hela?"
The lady nodded slightly, acknowledging her identity.
"May I offer you something to drink?" Lumian asked politely.
Hela didn't stand on ceremony.
"A glass of absinthe, and a triple espresso shot."
Drinking liquor at 10 a.m., quite the match for my habits... And she even goes for a triple shot of Reem espresso... Did she have a sleepless night? Or perhaps a night of drinking, seeking absinthe to clear her senses? Lumian lifted his right hand and snapped his fingers, signaling the waiter.
Once the light-green absinthe and the strong Reem espresso arrived in front of Hela, Lumian surveyed his surroundings to ensure a secure environment for their conversation.
Gulp... Hela downed half the glass of absinthe in one swift motion, her pale face gradually regaining some color.
Setting the glass down, she turned a ring on her right middle finger using her left thumb and index finger.
The ring possessed an elegant simplicity, a black diamond with numerous facets set into a base of pure silver.
As Hela rotated the ring gently, Lumian experienced a subtle shift in the surroundings, as if the ambient light had dimmed.
"No one can eavesdrop on us now." Hela's voice retained its chilly demeanor.
Impressive... This mastery goes beyond Franca's abilities. Truly befitting of a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society who has ventured farthest along the paths of the divine... Lumian maintained his gaze on Hela's black eyes that possessed a light-swallowing intensity. He proceeded with calm composure.
"I've made some new discoveries recently."
Hela remained silent, her gaze fixed on Lumian, awaiting further disclosure.
"I've caught Guillaume Bénet." Lumian conveyed this without an air of boastfulness; it was akin to a bartender at Salle de Bal Brise mentioning the concoction of a new cocktail.
Hela's response was a nod, displaying scant interest in the specifics of Guillaume Bénet's capture.
Commencing with Guillaume Bénet, Lumian recounted the transformations of Muggle—Aurore—detailing the peculiarities that arose, including the appearance of the lizard-like elf and the name Roche Louise Sanson.
In conclusion, he presented a stack of papers.
"This is the grimoire my sister penned three months prior to the

spread of Inevitability's faith in Cordu. Please review it and ascertain any irregularities."
Throughout the narrative, Hela remained an attentive listener. Yet, her emotional fluctuations and facial expressions remained limited. Only when Lumian mentioned the second appearance of the lizard-like elf and uttered the name "Roche Louise Sanson," did she exhibit a slight frown.
Hela, who had maintained silence, swiftly perused the grimoire, her pace almost supernatural, as though she could glean mystical insights from its pages with each flip, detecting any anomalies.
After a span of five to six minutes, she extracted a page from her notebook.
It bore the Soul Summoning Spell that Aurore had documented.
Only members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and those sharing common experiences would detect the issue at a glance... Lumian found himself stirred by a sudden wave of emotion.
Hela raised the absinthe once more, finishing the rest of the dreamy green liquid in a single gulp.
After finishing it, she turned her gaze to Lumian and spoke, "What are your thoughts on the matter of the lizard-like elf?"
"I've heard rumors that Heaven has banished a group of elves in recent times. Among them are some who bear resemblance to diaphanous lizards," Lumian responded. He refrained from delving into the symbolic interpretations that Mr. Poet had provided, instead opting to present the account provided by the official investigator, Ryan.
Hela's complexion took on a slightly rosier hue, the chill in her demeanor diminishing.
"I possess certain insights into these elves and have conducted a degree of study on them.
"They were not banished from Heaven. It's plausible that they originated from an alternate realm. Aligning certain folklore and events in the alternate realm, coupled with the passage of time, may have allowed elements from the alternate realm to permeate the spirit world and enter our world.
"At present, this is a hypothesis I personally have. I haven't substantiated it as yet. I simply wish to convey that I've studied the phenomenon of these elves in recent years and have personally encountered the diaphanous lizard-like elves you described. However, they differ from the diaphanous lizard-like beings you've mentioned."
"Not true elves?" Lumian expressed no surprise at this assertion. After all, Ryan and his colleagues had been theorizing, and Mr.

Poet's perspective leaned towards an affiliation with a different faction.
Hela chose not to elaborate, confirming Lumian's suspicion with a nod.
"I will continue to search for similar motifs in elf legends from various sources."
Having said that, she spun the grimoire containing the Soul Summoning Spell and pushed it toward Lumian.
"This is likely where your sister's problem originates."
Lumian's eyes conveyed his anticipation for an explanation.
He was genuinely curious to hear Hela's perspective. However, he didn't expect her to reveal the most closely guarded secret of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, as Franca had done.
Hela's tone remained as cold as ice as she began, "I've had numerous interactions with your sister and have discerned that she had been grappling with psychological turmoil rooted in her original family.
"Something is amiss with her biological family. Consequently, your sister had no recourse but to distance herself from them and seek refuge in the border village. It mirrors your gradual realization of Cordu's growing abnormality, prompting your desire to escape. That's why I directed your attention to this avenue of investigation.
"And should one employ the Soul Summoning Spell detailed in this notebook upon themselves, it's highly likely that your sister's psychological distress will escalate into a mental ailment, potentially leading to true dissociation of her personality."
Lumian pondered for a moment before inquiring, "Are you suggesting that Roche Louise Sanson is a dissociated persona of my sister? That the foundation of Inevitability's faith originates from her biological family?"
This deduction, while refraining from disclosing the most guarded secret of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, seemed to be the most logical conclusion. Yet, Madame Magician had also entertained the notion of dissociative identity disorder as one potential cause.
Hela took a sip of her triple-shot Reem espresso.
"The situation might be more complicated than a case of dissociative identity disorder. There seems to be some bizarre mystical phenomenon involved. That, however, remains contingent upon your future investigations."
Lumian acknowledged her response with a nod and posed his question with a serious demeanor,
"Is there any issue with the April Fool's member who sold the Soul Summoning Spell to my sister? Did they foresee a scenario

involving dissociative identity disorder?"
Hela remained silent for a few seconds before responding, "It's suspicious, but I cannot definitively be sure. I intend to probe further, although it might take a considerable duration of time. As you're aware, the organizational structure of the Research Society is quite informal, and my connections with the individuals from April Fool's are limited."
"I understand." Lumian had heard a similar sentiment from Franca.
Hela glanced at him and pondered for a moment.
"In reality, you are the most suitable candidate to investigate this matter. Unfortunately, you lack the necessary prerequisites."
"Why do you say that?" Lumian questioned, genuine surprise lacing his words.
For someone known for wit and mischief in Cordu, the prospect of heading the investigation was unexpected. He had assumed that his role would merely entail supporting Franca.
Hela's tone retained its chilliness.
"If you possessed a Beyonder power to physically alter your appearance, you could transform into Muggle and participate in various Research Society Gatherings as her.
"Then, when the occasion arises, you could observe any April Fool's member who reacts oddly to Muggle's presence and displays signs of abnormal behavior. You could even employ yourself as bait to draw out any individual harboring hidden motives."
Me assuming Aurore and using the code name Muggle to become a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society? Lumian had never envisioned such a scenario.
His brow furrowed as he remarked, "Can I really pull off being my sister even with a transformation item? Especially within your Research Society?"
He wasn't familiar with their world and its intricacies. *How could he effectively bridge the communication gap?*
Just a sentence or two could potentially blow his cover!

Chapter 339: Purpose of Visit

Hela continued in her cold voice, "Don't worry, there's no reason to fret. Our Research Society operates rather informally. Except for a handful of members who maintain close private communication, the rest only convene two to four times a year, all while in disguise.

"Your sister behaves quite relaxed at these gatherings. Her interactions would resemble her usual demeanor with you. However, she'll take care to guard her genuine information. You can certainly play the part.

"And many of the coded terms and expressions we employ for communication are familiar to you. Given your relationship with your sister, she won't intentionally keep them from you or abstain from using them."

"Understood." Lumian's mood suddenly soured. "She'll also explain the exact significance to me and attribute it to a philosopher from back home or even Emperor Roselle."

Upon hearing this, Hela responded, "If you truly possess the potential to masquerade as Muggle and engage with the Research Society members, there's no need to forcibly cite philosophers from back home. Simply allude to the latter portion of the content."

"Then, should I incorporate 'Emperor Roselle once said'?" Lumian deliberated the specifics earnestly.

He lacked a key item and couldn't authentically impersonate Aurore. And even though the Niese Face was primarily an illusion, it could be instantly deciphered by Beyonders equipped with the corresponding abilities—whether the other party held a rank as low as Sequence 9 Mystery Pryer, they'd discern his non-female identity at a glance. Yet, he remained determined to give his utmost. Who knew if a chance for Transfiguration with diminished negative effects would arise in the future?

Regarding mystic makeup achieved through the use of the Mystery Prying Glasses, it wouldn't provide psychological suggestions, given that attendees concealed their faces at the gathering. Furthermore, it couldn't alter his gender.

Hela lapsed into silence, her facial muscles twitching subtly.

"In the event that you're presented with an opportunity to enact such a role, make sure to avoid these mentions. You might not possess precise discernment about when such references are suitable.

"Just keep in mind, other members frequently employ the phrase 'Emperor Roselle once said' to liven the mood or offer amusement."

Why does it feel like Emperor Roselle's image in the Curly-Haired

Baboons Research Society isn't too favorable... It's not that it's unfavorable. Instead, it assumes a comedic quality... Speaking of which, Aurore appears to do the same. Whenever her spirits dip, as long as I deliberately reference Emperor Roselle's words, she tends to loosen up and finds herself chuckling involuntarily... Lumian struggled to fully grasp the rationale of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members, but he refrained from further probing, recognizing the necessity to feign ignorance concerning their most profound secret.

If the opportunity arose, he intended to seek Franca's insights on the matter.

Hela continued, "While participating in the gathering, keep in mind to listen more than you speak. If you lack confidence, avoid delving into profound discussions. Should others delve into the past, if possible, shift the focus and maintain a patronizing tone. Emulating Muggle's traits and characteristics will aid in effectively acting as her."

Lumian pondered for a moment.

"This guise, however, remains merely a surface-level ruse. Your Research Society houses Beyonders adept in divination and possessing keen intuition. They could readily discern that I'm not my sister."

"No, quite the contrary. They might prove you to be the genuine Muggle," Hela furnished an unforeseen response to Lumian's expectation.

In the midst of his unveiled astonishment, Hela expounded, "To begin with, most of us remain unaware of the realities of our fellow members, impeding our capacity for efficacious divination or prophecy.

"Additionally, with my understanding of your sister, I employed an artifact to divine her state. Yet, I couldn't ascertain her life or death status. It was akin to confronting a formidable anti-divination barrier."

Wh— Lumian was caught off guard before grasping the underlying rationale.

As per Madam Magician, Aurore hadn't entirely died. A possibility of revival persisted, her soul shard sealed by Mr. Fool, thereby rendering conventional divination unable to circumvent the seal and ascertain Aurore's genuine condition. A potent anti-divination effect was at play.

Hela took another sip of her triple shot Reem espresso.

"Most crucially, subsequent to our meeting today, my spiritual intuition tells me that when I confront you, divination or prophecy regarding Aurore will point toward you."

What? Lumian nearly blurted out the question.
Before long, he cast his gaze downwards to his left chest and offered a wry smile.
"Perhaps this stems from the fact that a fragment of my sister's soul has been specially preserved within me."
Lumian let out a long sigh.
"What a pity..."
Post Hela's analysis, he harbored the conviction that he could seamlessly stand in for his sister within the folds of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society without incurring exposure.
He yearned to do so. This way, he could not only aid Franca in her operation but also safeguard her from solitary risks. Together, they could operate—one in plain sight, the other in the shadows—ensnaring their adversary in a carefully orchestrated trap.
Simultaneously, Lumian recognized the potential of utilizing the society's gatherings to gather invaluable information about Aurore.
Regrettably, his one hindrance was his lack of Transfiguration abilities. The power to alter his gender, stature, or physique eluded him.
A brief silence hung in the air before Hela reiterated her commitment to investigating the April Fool's predicament.
Following that, she spoke candidly, "I've come to Trier this time to delve deeper past the catacombs. Do you have any information about that place?"
Deeper into the catacombs? Lumian's heart skipped a beat as he took the initiative to remind her, "It's very dangerous there."
Madame Hela's guidance from her letters and prior suggestion had been invaluable. With deep appreciation, he recounted his grasp of the catacombs and the bizarre phenomena he had borne witness to. Finally, he said, "For some inexplicable reason, I alone retain memories of the ill-fated couple. The rest feign ignorance, as though they never existed. True, Kendall, the administrator of the tomb, ought to have sensed it as well, yet he feigned ignorance."
Hela listened in quiet contemplation. Without astonishment or consternation, she inquired, "Have you heard of the Samaritan Women's Spring?"
"I have, though from the mouth of a charlatan..." Lumian mused, his brow furrowing as he tried to recall Osta Trul's narrative. "He claimed that the Samaritan Women's Spring on the upper level of the catacombs is a sham. Just a puddle left behind due to a construction error back then. The administrators spun it into a legend. But deep in the underground world, within an ancient tomb, there lies the real Fountain of Oblivion."
Hela refrained from commenting on Lumian's account and simply

nodded.
"Thank you."
With her gratitude expressed, she downed the last of her three-shot espresso, rose from her seat, and made her way toward the café's exit.
As she rose from her seat, the heavy silence was shattered, and the sunlight once again flooded the area with its radiance.
Lumian remained seated a while longer, savoring the last sips of his Macael coffee. Afterwards, he strode along Rue Ancienne, his destination being Place du Purgatoire. There, he planned to catch a public carriage back to the market district.
Passing by Salle de Bal Unique and the Alone bar, a sudden, crystalline tinkle reached Lumian's ears.
His heart skipped a beat, and he swiftly turned around. He saw a figure he knew well, who had just entered the newly opened Alone bar.
Draped in a delicate, pale-white fishnet dress, the figure sported a small, circular hat adorned with silk flowers. Two dainty silver bells dangled from the intricate hair buns, complementing the similar accessories on the figure's dark-hued boots.
Leah... Bureau 8's Leah... Lumian recognized the person as Leah, the official investigator who had entered his dream.
Once affiliated with Bureau 8's Riston Province branch, she had now appeared in Trier and entered the somewhat peculiar Alone bar.
Salle de Bal Unique is perilous. Could the Alone bar be used by Bureau 8 to monitor the opposing stronghold? After retracting his gaze, Lumian continued forward as if nothing had happened.
...
Returning to Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian found himself summoned to 11 Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative by Gardner Martin, just when he was hoping for some rest.
Inside a room adorned with bookshelves, Gardner Martin, donned in a light-colored shirt and dark trousers, greeted him with an energetic smile.
"Franca mentioned that your vengeance is complete?"
Lumian detected an odd thrill emanating from the Boss, as if he had indulged in immense pleasure and hadn't fully calmed down.
He responded candidly, "Yes, I've already killed Guillaume Bénet. Thankfully, Red Boots, Jenna, and Anthony Reid, the information broker I hired, assisted me."
He spared no details about the participants—there was no use concealing anything. They relied on "Rat" Christo and his pets to

communicate, after all.
Gardner Martin nodded slightly and commented, "You've exceeded my expectations in terms of efficiency. Franca didn't delve into the specifics. Can you give me an overview of the overall situation?"
Lumian held nothing back when it came to the Sinners organization. He elucidated Guillaume Bénet's various abilities, detailing their specific impacts.
Gardner Martin listened intently and asked in thought, "What do you reckon is Guillaume Bénet's strength equivalent to in Sequence?"
Lumian replied without hesitation, "Sequence 5."
A brief pause ensued as Gardner Martin fell into contemplative silence before he uttered, "I've summoned you for a purpose, a mission."
"What mission?" Lumian didn't hide his curiosity.
Gardner Martin's smile reappeared.
"It's quite straightforward. Make your way to the Mechanical Café in Quartier de l'Opéra and establish contact with a literary and arts group named 'Black Cat.'"
"I lack any artistic inclination," Lumian honestly admitted.
Gardner Martin smiled and said, "No artistic inclination is necessary. Your primary role will involve sponsoring and befriending one of the members of Black Cat.
"His ancestor boasted an aristocratic title of a count, a fact he's quite fond of calling himself that.
"Right, his name is Poufer Sauron."

Chapter 340: Black Cat

Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra, Rue Lombar.

The street was famous for its array of sweets, and colorful candies adorned every corner.

At the end of Rue Lombar stood the Mechanical Café, nestled next to a small confectionery factory.

From the outside, it looked like an ordinary place, and even peering through the glass windows, there was no hint of its mechanical nature. The black Triangular Sacred Emblem on the weighty wooden door was the only reminder of its true identity.

Lumian pushed the dark-brown door, but it resisted as if locked from within.

After a moment's observation, he pulled the doorbell hanging by the secondary window.

Amidst the tinkling chimes, Lumian caught the soft clink of metal and watched as the door inched open.

A mechanical arm extended from its rear, reaching all the way to the bar counter like an ornamental display.

Surveying the surroundings, Lumian made his way to a corner of the café. Two single-legged tables were placed there, hosting five individuals.

Among them, a middle-aged man with fiery red hair stood out. Fair-skinned from cosmetics, with dark circles accentuating his brownish-red eyes, he was a captivating figure.

Clean-shaven, he sported an open brown velvet coat and a red shirt sans bow tie, exuding an air of refinement and casual elegance.

This was "Count" Poufer, the member of Intis's former royal Sauron family whom Lumian sought.

Having inherited a substantial fortune from his father, he hadn't ventured into politics, military service, or trade. Instead, he moved within various artistic circles as a literary critic and frequented "Black Cat" gatherings.

Approaching with a smile, Lumian inquired, "Are you Count Poufer?"

Poufer Sauron looked up casually, his tone relaxed as he asked, "Are you the friend Martin mentioned?"

"Yes, Ciel Dubois." Lumian responded without any reservation, claiming a seat by pulling up a chair.

Poufer gave him a measured once-over, a satisfied smile playing on his lips.

"Not bad at all; you're quite the beautiful friend."

"Among literature, oil paintings, sculptures, poetry, and music,

what's your preference?"
"Novels," Lumian replied without hesitation.
Poufer leaned back, gesturing towards the plump middle-aged man diagonally across from him.
"Anori, the author with the most literary eloquence in recent times."
The author who delved into the realm of erotica, forgetting that the essence of writing is to explore human nature? Lumian naturally recollected Aurore's assessment of this novelist.
Initially, Anori's works had explored love as a means to understand humanity. But over time, the focus shifted, consumed by the former. Aurore believed that if not for restrictions, Anori might have penned something akin to 'Monks Chasing Dogs'—a risqué novel.
Of course, Lumian cared little for probing human nature; he simply enjoyed the engaging parts.
"Your novels have certainly broadened my horizons," he said to Anori genuinely.
With black hair and blue eyes, Arnaud puffed on his pipe and remarked, "Luckily, you didn't mention appreciating my 'Death of a Herald.'"
Death of a Herald... Isn't that Adri's work? Right, Aurore had mentioned the similarity in names, leading to frequent confusion.
Enlightenment dawned as Lumian inquired, "You mean the Adri who's backed by the government, earning a five-figure fortune yearly, yet only manages to produce dogsh*t?"
Anori erupted in laughter.
"That's worth a glass of absinthe!"
With that, he tapped the silver-gray metal button on the single-legged table before him, thrice.
Count Poufer took pleasure in Lumian's reception and proceeded to introduce the other members of the Black Cat organization.
Among them were Mullen, a painter with a pale and weary complexion, Ernst Young, a slightly stern-looking literary critic, and Iraeta, a poet who held a cherrywood pipe.
Just as Lumian was wrapping up his greetings, he witnessed the iron-colored surface of Anori's one-legged table split open unexpectedly, unfolding like a blossoming flower.
Within the "stamen," a glass of emerald absinthe, radiating a dreamlike sheen, appeared on a tray that ascended through a mechanical lift.
Author Anori picked up the glass of absinthe and tossed a silver coin worth 1 verl d'or onto the tray.
Gradually, the mechanical elevator descended, causing the parted

metal surface to seal shut, restoring the one-legged table to its original state.
Anori slid the absinthe toward Lumian, a smile gracing his features.
"Cheers to what you just said!"
It's really a Mechanical Café... Lumian reacquainted himself with this place.
His gaze drifted to the table's broad and sturdy leg, suspecting it to be hollow and linked to an underground conduit.
Taking a sip of the absinthe and savoring its familiar bitterness, Lumian directed his attention to the one-legged table.
"No change?"
"Here, a glass of absinthe costs 1 verl d'or," Anori responded with a grin.
Isn't that rather steep? Salle de Bal Brise and the basement bar only charge seven licks. Their quality is nearly identical... Lumian critiqued inwardly.
1 verl d'or was equivalent to 20 licks.
At that instant, Mullen, the pale-faced painter who seemed perpetually fatigued but was a handsome man, took a sip of his coffee and shared, "I heard that an elephant has arrived at Trier Zoo. Quite an uncommon sight."
The pudgy Anori muttered, "What's so intriguing about an elephant? It strikes me as utterly mundane."
Count Poufer let out a soft chuckle.
"Shall we then discuss the ongoing clash between the parliament and the two Churches, the high-ranking government officials perpetually stumbling, the detestable censorship of publications, and the covert agents shadowing us like hyenas?"
Anori sighed in resignation.
"Let's just stick to that elephant."
Amidst the laughter of the Black Cat members, Count Poufer crossed his right leg and proposed, "Since we have a new friend, how about engaging in a game of mysticism?"
A game involving mysticism? Lumian's eyebrows twitched.
"What sort of game?" inquired Iraeta, the poet, puffing contemplatively on his pipe.
Count Poufer smiled and said, "A game known as King's Pie."
Observing the perplexed expressions around the table, Count Poufer chuckled and continued, "Don't any of you have a childhood or a family? Haven't you played this game?
"The rule is to divide the King's Pie into portions equal to the number of participants plus 1. The larger piece is ritually dedicated to a deity or esteemed ancestor we hold in reverence. Among the

remaining portions, one contains a broad bean or coin, hidden. Whoever discovers it becomes the 'king' for the day, empowered to issue commands to the others. Naturally, these commands must remain within the bounds of reason."
The mysticism aspect involves offering up the excess King's Pie in sacrifice? Lumian cast a glance at Anori, Mullen, and the rest, intrigued by the idea and curious whether any Beyonders were part of the group.
Of course, none of them appeared to be.
In just over ten seconds, Count Poufer's proposal garnered agreement from everyone except Lumian.
He commenced by pressing the corresponding button on his one-legged table, hitting it the appropriate number of times to signal the kitchen to dispatch a King's Pie.
Reportedly, this dessert had been a favorite since the era of the Sauron Dynasty.
...
In the underground of Église Saint-Robert, within the confines of the Inquisition, a gathering of Purifiers was underway. Valentine, Imre, and their fellow Purifiers congregated in the office of Deacon Angoulême.
Dressed in a light-gold shirt and pale-white pants, Angoulême raised the dossier in his hand and addressed the group, "We've verified the body found at 50 Rue Vincent in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge to be that of Guillaume Bénet, the former wanted padre. Ensure that the police headquarters takes down the wanted posters from the market district."
The market district case wasn't under the Purifiers' jurisdiction, but Valentine had heard about it. Finally, there was confirmation.
Sporting a formal blue coat, Valentine glanced at Angoulême and asked, "Deacon, have there been any developments in the investigation into Guillaume Bénet's killer?"
"At the moment, no suspects," responded Angoulême, his golden hair, eyebrows, and beard lending him an imposing aura. He continued, "What we can ascertain is that there were clear signs of incineration at the scene, and it's likely that Guillaume Bénet succumbed to a Demoness's curse."
"At least a Sequence 7 Hunter and a Demoness? That's an uncommon combination," Imre remarked, clearly taken aback.
To his knowledge, most who followed the Demoness pathway were affiliated with the Demoness family, a formidable secret organization that seldom required collaboration.
"Uncommon doesn't mean impossible," retorted Angoulême.
As a Purifier deacon, he had access to more confidential

information and experience compared to Imre, Valentine, and the others. He had even personally executed two members of the Demoness family.
Valentine furrowed his brow, ruminating for a moment before suggesting, "Could Lumian Lee be involved? He does have a solid motive."
"But he lacks the power," Imre objected. "How could he advance to Pyromaniac so quickly after leaving Cordu? Isn't he concerned about losing control? Furthermore, based on your description, not even a Pyromaniac would be a match for Guillaume Bénet."
Valentine clung to his conjecture.
"That's why he might have sought help from a Demoness.
"Could he have joined the Demoness family to seek revenge and then transition into becoming a Demoness himself?
"If that's true, this could become a major issue. Lumian Lee carries significant problems with him. And you mentioned the Demoness family's penchant for sowing chaos."
Angoulême nodded. "We must keep a close eye on this. I'll report this matter. Meanwhile, intensify the scrutiny of suspicious individuals in the market district."
Having made up his mind, he reassured Valentine, "Don't be overly anxious. Lumian Lee isn't the only one with a reason to eliminate Guillaume Bénet. There are powerful bounty hunters, official members of the Aurora Order, and the bestowed of other evil gods."
Valentine acknowledged concisely, signifying his comprehension.
Following their discussion on recent Beyonder cases, Valentine and Imre exited the deacon's office, passing by Charlie who was acquainting himself with a mechanical typewriter, before heading towards the tunnel leading to Église Saint-Robert.
"Why do you think the quasi-Demoness is seeking us? Has she uncovered crucial information?" Imre inquired curiously, conversing with his fellow teammate.
Valentine ruminated briefly before responding, "Could it be related to Guillaume Bénet's death?"
Imre was caught off guard.
"Are you suggesting she had contact with the Demoness family?"
Before Valentine could reply, Imre shook his head.
"That's impossible. The Demoness family despises female Assassins. If they encounter one, they'll surely eliminate them."

Chapter 341: Branch

On Rue Doyle, nestled between the market district and the solemn Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, stretched a verdant street. Its clean pavements and modern architectural style set it apart from its surroundings. Jenna had deliberately chosen this location to rendezvous with the Purifiers. The individuals frequenting this place had little connection to her former life, and the likelihood of recognition was slim.

Clothed in a pristine white blouse and a light-brown dress, Jenna's attire differed slightly from her previous encounters with the two Purifiers. This strategic variation was intended to thwart any attempts by the other party to decipher her intentions if she were to wear the same ensemble repeatedly.

Nevertheless, her overall presentation remained faithful to a certain style: a portrayal of cleanliness, radiance, and vitality. This image was a composite distilled from the bishop's sermons and the impassioned advocacy she had encountered during her involvement in Church activities.

A Sun Talisman dangled around her neck, accentuating her brownish-yellow hair that was neatly tied up. She followed the elongated shadows cast by the trees, moving toward Apartment 17.

In the midst of her journey, a brown four-wheeled carriage rumbled by. The window was ajar, revealing an arresting visage.

Adorned in a black court dress, a lady graced the carriage's interior. A dark veil hat adorned with white feathers crowned her head, intricately framing her raven-black hair. Her face boasted soft contours; her chin held a graceful curve. A slender, elevated nose bridge led to plump, subtly upturned crimson lips. Within her dark gray eyes, a glint of brightness coexisted with a hint of melancholy, evoking a pang of sympathy.

How beautiful... Jenna sighed from the bottom of her heart as the carriage passed.

Even though Jenna herself could be considered attractive, she remained capable of appreciating the allure of others. Simultaneously, she acknowledged the stark contrast between her appearance and that of Franca, who had ascended to the rank of Demoness of Pleasure, as well as the lady who had just passed.

Shifting her focus, Jenna ascended to the roof of Apartment 17 on Rue Doyle.

Her wait was brief, for Imre and Valentine soon appeared.

Valentine's demeanor, though frosty, gave way to a proactive inquiry. "Have you obtained crucial intelligence?"

Valentine's gaze swept past Jenna's neck, where the Sun Sacred

Emblem was suspended. A subtle nod confirmed his satisfaction.
Jenna shook her head slowly. "No."
Without permitting Imre and Valentine to voice their queries, she bared her emotions in earnest. "I want to repent."
Repent? Imre exchanged a quizzical glance with Valentine.
Had something gone awry?
Jenna's gaze lowered, a bittersweet smile touching her lips as she regarded the ground.
"My mother haunts my dreams, recurring persistently.
"And each time she appears in my sleep, I find myself grappling with a nagging question: Why did the Church permit someone like Hugues Artois to partake in the elections? Upon uncovering the truth, why did they not promptly apprehend his accomplices and thus forestall the ensuing catastrophe?
"I-I yearn for redemption. The pain gnaws at my heart, sowing doubt in my faith, and causing me to question whether God and the Church still watch over us."
These sentiments were sincere, albeit less intense than they seemed.
Valentine felt ashamed and didn't know how to respond to Jenna.
Imre, who had experienced many similar situations, sighed and consoled her skillfully, "There's no need to doubt that God is always watching over us. The Sun graces the land each day, yet we understand that the ebb and flow of light and darkness constitutes the essence of our world. Just as the Sun sets inevitably to give rise to night, it's this very cycle that allows us to revel in the radiance of the morning and the ascent of the sun.
"Likewise, the Church isn't all-powerful. In Intis, we remain subject to the constraints imposed by the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, the National Convention, and the government. Our actions are bound by limitations; we cannot operate without restraint and probe at will.
"Pain and calamity are integral facets of existence. Their presence varies, but they are transient, much like the Sun's emergence after the darkness."
Jenna fell into contemplative silence for a few seconds before exhaling, a slow release of tension. She extended her arms slightly, proclaiming, "Praise the Sun!"
"Praise the Sun!" both Valentine and Imre echoed in unison.
With her sincere performance, Jenna asked, "Who propelled Hugues Artois to the position of parliament member? And who facilitated his representation for an evil god?"
"We're in the midst of investigating. No substantial breakthroughs have emerged thus far," Imre replied after measured

consideration.
Jenna's expression turned to one of anxiety and concern.
"Why the lack of substantive progress? Is it due to the limitations mentioned earlier, which hinder the acquisition of pivotal leads? Do you require my help? I operate unbound by restrictions and hold no fear of breaching the law!"
Imre and Valentine weren't caught off guard by Jenna's reaction. It echoed the same spirit as her abrupt assassination of Hugues Artois, albeit in a more subdued form.
The two exchanged glances, a wordless deliberation on whether to entrust this matter to an informant bound by contract, thereby affording greater flexibility and latitude.
Drawing upon Franca's counsel, Jenna refrained from invoking Instigation directly. She instead gauged the disposition of the two Purifiers and employed words to accomplish her intent.
"If the Church itself finds its hands tied, could it not delegate the task to capable devotees?
"Which holds greater importance—the Church's dignity or the well-being of God's children?
"With each thwarted catastrophe, numerous families and lives are spared. They all stand as devout supplicants to the Sun.
"An evil god was backing Hugues Artois!"
Valentine found himself swayed, and observing Imre's absence of dissent, he addressed Jenna with gravity, "Are you sure you want to help us investigate this matter? It's very dangerous. The odds of forfeiting your life are substantial."
Jenna responded with a smile suffused with complexity, "I'm afraid of death, but I'm more afraid of becoming a sacrificial lamb for the heretics, much like my mother."
She didn't hide her hatred at all.
Imre then said, "In the course of our investigations, we've ascertained that Hugues Artois shared close ties with General Philip. Certain covert activities trace back to him. However, General Philip succumbed to illness last year, resulting in the loss of all leads.
"The other backers and supporters of Hugues Artois either owed their allegiance to General Philip or deemed him an asset worthy of support. Their involvement in heretical belief or secret organizations remains unverified."
Jenna blurted out, "What about Philip's family? What of the heretics who encircled Hugues Artois?"
"There's nothing wrong with Philip's family," Valentine responded, his tone revealing traces of vexation. "We've apprehended only two heretics affiliated with Hugues Artois's campaign. Their roles were

comparatively inconsequential. The individual most knowledgeable opted for suicide when escape became unfeasible. His fanaticism stymied our quest for the sought-after leads. We've effectively eliminated two branches of the secret organization, the Order of All Extinction."
Order of All Extinction... Jenna recalled the secret organization that believed in an evil god.
Imre supplemented, "The primary source of knowledge is the red-haired woman named Cassandra. She hails from the Sauron lineage, a collateral branch of the former royal family. A Beyonder and a heretic graced with a boon."
"Is there anything wrong with the Sauron family?" Jenna inquired further.
Imre shook his head.
"At present, no concrete conclusions exist. The noble families that supported Hugues Artois maintain standard relations with the Sauron family. Cassandra chose an adventuring life, as she encountered minimal regard within the Sauron family hierarchy. Subsequently, she became a Beyonder, ultimately joining Hugues Artois's team last year."
...
Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra, Rue Lombar, Mechanical Café.
Mechanical precision guided the King's Pie to Poufer Sauron and his associates within the Black Cat organization. The pie bore the appearance of a brown floral marvel adorned with intricate black motifs.
Poufer looked around and said to Lumian, Anori, and the others, "I suggest that this game of King's Pie serves as a tribute to one of my esteemed forebears. He held the title of the first Count Ardennen and the twenty-seventh Count of Champagne."
In his interactions, Poufer habitually designated himself as Count Ardennen.
"The Count of Champagne, the one who coveted Roselle's ass?" Novelist Anori quipped with a grin.
Over the past year, the most sought-after banned manuscript within Trier's covert book market had been "Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles." Within its pages lay a trove of Emperor Roselle-related rumors, intermingled with an array of outlandish, sizzling revelations.
Poufer sighed and said, "That would be the thirtieth Count of Champagne, the great-grandson of my illustrious ancestor. He hails from a distinct Sauron family branch."
"I have no objections." The flaxen-haired painter, Mullen, steered the conversation back on track.

This was merely a game—no one else insisted on allocating the surplus King's Pie to a specific figure, thus prompt consensus was achieved.
Considering Lumian's usual style, he should have objected and angered Count Poufer. However, he recalled that his current role revolved around that of a friend of Gardner Martin, scion of a prosperous merchant family with a penchant for art. He was essentially playing the role of a spendthrift imbecile, a persona that basked in the lavish spending only to incur disdain.
Poufer shifted his attention to the more reticent literary critic, Ernst Young, and instructed, "You shall have the honor of cutting the pie."
Ernst Young, his black curls framing his face, indulged in a self-deprecating smile.
"I despise the absence of waiters in the Mechanical Café. It makes me feel like a waiter."
"Isn't that a good thing? It signifies the absence of spies," Novelist Anori muttered.
A puff of cherrywood smoke escaped the pipe held by Iraeta, the poet, as he chuckled in response, "Perhaps the spy is among us."
At that moment, Ernst Young had already picked up the table knife, slicing the King's Pie into seven equal portions.
Poufer delicately positioned one of the King's Pie slices near the plate's rim, hands clasped, cradling it against his chest. His voice, a soft cadence, invoked an invocation, "To you, member of the mighty Sauron family, the great Vermonda Champagne Sauron."
Poufer repeated the incantation thrice. Lumian couldn't help but note that Mechanical Café, already bereft of its waiters, descended into an amplified hush, akin to the commencement of the bishops' sermons.
After offering the excess portion of the King's Pie to Vermonda Sauron, Poufer raised his gaze to Lumian and grinned.
"You're the guest. You'll be the first to choose."
Without observing, Lumian extended his hand to the King's Pie closest to him.
At that moment, Termiboros's resonant voice echoed in Lumian's ears: "Switch."

Chapter 342: Fright?

Switch? Lumian hadn't anticipated that Termiboros would drop a hint at a moment like this.

Whether this Inevitability angel aimed to use the opportunity to set a trap or had some other intention, or if He simply sought to avert any trouble from befalling His vessel at this particular time and place, it was clear that this seemingly unremarkable game of King's Pie concealed profound hidden hazards. Once triggered, it would plunge all those present into a perilous abyss.

When Count Poufer brought up the mystical aspect, the act of sacrificing a piece of King's Pie to a deity or revered ancestor, Lumian suspected the presence of a Beyonder element. It resembled the divination games favored by many enthusiasts of mysticism. To his astonishment, the issue proved even graver than he had initially imagined. It had prompted an angel to believe that he—Lumian, a dual Sequence 7—was incapable of handling it or could be harmed by it.

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian struggled to fathom Termiboros's motives. All he could manage was cautiously extending his arm and nonchalantly selecting one of the remaining five slices of King's Pie.

This time, Termiboros didn't intervene.

After Lumian, Anori, Mullen, Ernst Young, and Iraeta each acquired a slice of King's Pie, only the one nearest to Lumian remained.

"Seems like it's mine." Count Poufer leaned in, grinned, and seized the slice of King's Pie. He brought it to his mouth and delicately took a bite.

Lumian followed suit. The crust was crisp, the filling sweet, its aroma lingering on his palate. The quality was rather impressive.

After a few bites, Count Poufer chuckled and remarked, "Looks like I'm the king today."

As he uttered the words, he extracted a broad bean from his mouth.

The instant Lumian laid eyes on the broad bean, a faint trace of blood and rust wafted to his senses.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere in the Mechanical Café grew heavy, as if everyone dreaded receiving an order they couldn't bear.

Count Poufer rose from his seat, his back to the window that faced the street, blotting out the sunlight, which cast a faint shadow over his face. His smile seemed somewhat dark.

Count Poufer's gaze fixed upon the novelist Anori, a mischievous smile dancing on his lips.

"Step outside the café and declare to the passersby, 'I'm dog sh*t.'"

Anori, who had been on edge, let out a sigh of relief and responded with a grin, "Sure thing."
The portly man rose from his seat and hastened to the door, grasping the handle nestled in the side wall.
Amidst a grinding noise and faint clatters, the mechanical arm suddenly tightened, its grip "dragging" the weighty wooden door ajar.
Anori ventured outside and onto the street. He directed his voice at the pedestrians, "I'm dogsh*t!
"I'm a piece of dogsh*t raised by a sow!
"My whole family is dogsh*t raised by sows!"
The passersby stared in astonishment before erupting into laughter.
After cursing himself, Anori returned to Lumian and the others in high spirits.
"You've got an impressive mental fortitude." Lumian compelled himself to rephrase "you're really thick-skinned" in a more polished manner.
Novelist Anori chuckled and said, "Whenever I'm stuck in my writing, I'll curse myself out on the balcony. It's the simplest method."
"You writers do have your peculiarities." Lumian was reminded of his sister, who fancied herself afflicted by an advanced stage of procrastination syndrome.
Anori took a sip of absinthe and resettled himself. His attention turned to Count Poufer, who, with his back to the light, cast his gaze upon Mullen, the pale and handsome painter.
"Slap Iraeta."
Mullen relaxed in his seat, opting not to rise. He leaned forward and delivered a slap to Poet Iraeta.
Iraeta, his hair thinning and his facial muscles slightly sagging, remained unperturbed. He merely drew another puff from his pipe.
Noticing Lumian's scrutiny, he offered a casual smile.
"As a poet, I must learn to relish the malice around me."
Finding joy in malice... What a poetic youth. Well, more accurately, a poetic middle-aged man... Lumian surveyed the participants of the game, realizing that aside from Count Poufer, who had consumed the broad bean, nothing else appeared amiss.
Count Poufer shifted his posture slightly, his features still shaded by the backlight.
He said to Ernst Young, "Express your loyalty to me."
When the Black Cats convened, they often engaged in a variety of audacious acts. In a more contemporary characterization, they

were avant-gardes of performance art. Hence, Ernst Young felt no qualms about kneeling on one knee and professing loyalty. He even considered it insufficient, sensing that it lacked excitement or humiliation.

Count Poufer then turned to the poet, Iraeta, and dictated, "Give all your money to the beggar across the street."

Iraeta was taken aback. His heart ached as he responded, "Alright.

"As you know, I'm a pauper. Over the past five years, I've scarcely earned 3,000 verl d'or from my poetry. Each day, I ponder which friend might organize an event and offer me a free drink."

Quite the honest poet... Lumian pondered whether he should sponsor this individual and witness what kind of verses he could produce. After all, the "sponsorship fee" was supplied by Gardner Martin. Not employing it would result in it going unused. Conversely, by sponsoring certain artists, he could potentially pocket a portion for himself.

Before Count Poufer could reply, Iraeta suddenly burst into laughter. He fumbled in his pocket and exclaimed with excitement, "That's why I only brought 5 verl d'or!"

"5 verl d'or? At the Vichy Café, that'd barely cover half a bottle of mineral water and two boiled eggs," Novelist Anori murmured as he watched Poet Iraeta hastily depart. He tossed the 5 verl d'or to the beggar opposite.

Vichy Café resided in an alley off Avenue du Boulevard. It drew parliament members, high-ranking government officials, bankers, industrialists, financiers, famed courtesans, and esteemed authors, painters, poets, and sculptors from the upper echelons of society.

By this juncture, every participant had taken their turn, leaving Lumian as the last.

Count Poufer fixed his gaze on Lumian, his look profound as he spoke, "This is your inaugural time attending our Black Cat gathering. I'll assign you a simple task. Take your slice of King's Pie and proceed to the last room in the café's basement. Exchange the pie for a sheet of white paper."

This bears a hint of mystique... If anything goes awry, I'll just burn down that basement... Lumian mumbled to himself as he clutched the partially-eaten King's Pie. As per Novelist Anori's guidance, he located a staircase leading to the basement close to the kitchen.

Before venturing forth, he ignited the gas wall lamps in the vicinity. Under their faint yellow radiance, he navigated a corridor cluttered with various items until he reached the last room.

The vermilion door stood tightly sealed. Lumian listened attentively but detected no movements from within.

There were no suspicious signs around the door either.
Lumian extended his right palm, gripped the handle, gave it a gentle twist, and gradually pushed inward.
As the gas lamps in the basement's corridor illuminated the space, objects came into view.
These objects were heads, clustered within the dusky shadows, their gazes devoid of emotion, fixed on the "intruder" at the entrance.
Lumian's pupils dilated as he recognized a few familiar heads.
They belonged to Novelist Anori, Painter Mullen, Critic Ernst Young, and Poet Iraeta!
Just before conjuring a fireball, Lumian, experienced and resilient, forced himself to steady his nerves and discern the situation.
The heads lacked the pallor of the deceased, and the room was bereft of the distinct scent of preservatives.
Lumian reined in his initial reaction and scrutinized the scene. He realized that these were wax heads that had been taken down.
Resembling melons, they were stashed within compartments on a wooden frame.
Is this mission intended to startle me? Were it not for Termiboros's forewarning, how could such a prank perturb me? What's so mystical about this? Lumian ruminated for a moment before placing his King's Pie on a wooden shelf and extracting a sheet of white paper from one of the wax heads.
Upon returning to the Mechanical Café with the white paper in hand, he was met with smiles from Anori, Iraeta, and the others, as though gauging any lingering trepidation.
Count Poufer nodded in satisfaction.
"You executed the mission admirably."
What if I hadn't executed it admirably? What would have transpired? Lumian simulated residual unease and inquired,
"Those wax heads seemed so lifelike that they nearly stopped my heart!"
"Haha," Anori chortled. "This serves as Count's welcome gesture to every newcomer. He's rather fond of collecting wax figurine heads. Each individual he acknowledges receives an invitation from a wax sculptor to immortalize their heads as art and place them in the basement of the Mechanical Café."
It's almost as if your heads have been given to Count Poufer... Lumian eyed Anori and the others' necks, yet found no trace of sutures.
After delving into various rumors circulating within the novelists' circle and offering 2,000 verl d'or to sponsor the Black Cat, Lumian took his leave.

As he departed, his gaze inadvertently swept over the two-legged tables.
Abruptly, Lumian's pupils constricted.
He observed that Count Poufer, Anori, and the others still had unfinished King's Pie on their plates, while the white-glazed porcelain plate that had previously held the pie now sat empty.
There should have been a slice of King's Pie intended for the Sauron family ancestor!
It was gone!
Lumian's perplexity couldn't be concealed. He gestured toward the snack plate and remarked,
"I recall there being a slice of King's Pie left."
Count Poufer chuckled and sipped his coffee.
"I ate it."
"Is that so..." Lumian smiled in realization.
Turning away, he exited the Mechanical Café, the smile on his face gradually waning.
Count Poufer had only taken two bites of his slice of King's Pie!

Chapter 343: Feedback

As Lumian strode down Rue Lombar toward the nearest public carriage stop, a sense of unease settled over him. Observing the deserted street, he dropped his voice to a hushed tone as he muttered, "Temiboros, why did you make me choose the King's Pie slice without the broad bean?"

What if he had consumed that fateful broad bean and ascended to the role of the "king"?

But Termiboros remained silent, withholding any response.

Lumian pondered for a moment, then rephrased his question.

"Though the entire incident held a few unsettling details, the outcome appeared unremarkable. It's hard to discern whether it's tied to mysticism or Beyonder powers."

After a brief pause, Termiboros's deep voice echoed in Lumian's ears.

"Next time, you could consider defying the king's orders."

What if I chose to disregard the king's commands? What if I indulged in my King's Pie instead of placing it in the room of wax figurines or even walking away with the paper? Lumian's mind plunged into contemplation.

Rather than heading directly back to the market district, he hailed a public carriage bound for Rue Scheer on Avenue du Boulevard.

As an official member of the Aurora Order, he bore the responsibility of promptly reporting his execution of Guillaume Bénet and the latest developments within the Iron and Blood Cross Order to Mr. K. Simultaneously, he hoped to fleece something out of them.

Participating in three secret organizations came with the potential of receiving triple rewards, but it also entailed making three reports per mission.

19 Rue Scheer, underground of Psychic's headquarters.

Mr. K, perpetually unchanging, sat in the red armchair, attentively listening as Lumian recounted his strategic utilization of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's resources to pinpoint and eliminate Guillaume Bénet, the heretic.

When Lumian mentioned how the former padre of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church had embraced the entity known as Inevitability in pursuit of power and strength, Mr. K lowered his head and traced a cross upon his chest in a deliberate up-and-down, left-to-right motion. His voice, hoarse and subdued, chanted a prayer, "Merciful Father, forgive the world's transgressions."

Lumian's lips twitched, mirroring Mr. K's penance, although he couldn't fathom the necessity of such repentance.

Post-repentance, he succinctly recounted Aurore's dual nature and the sinister Sinners organization that underpinned Roche Louise Sanson. Finally, he said, "Mr. K, I request your aid in locating the original family of Aurore—or rather, Roche Louise Sanson. They may well be tied to the Sinners, a heretical group devoted to Inevitability."

Mr. K's face, obscured beneath a voluminous hood, remained shrouded in shadow. His words, tinged with satisfaction, hoarsely resonated. "I understand your desire to avenge Aurore. There is no problem in that. The benevolent Father and the omnipotent God do not bar believers from securing their own futures. If they can intertwine personal matters with the sacred crusade against heresy, all the better.

"In this endeavor, leveraging your assets and harnessing the resources of the Iron and Blood Cross Order to fulfill your objective is a strategy I admire. Strive for more of such feats.

"I'll investigate the Sinners."

He agreed to Lumian's request as it aligned perfectly with his own aspirations.

By unearthing Roche Louise Sanson's family, he could deal with the Sinners, a faction devoted to the evil god, Inevitability!

"Thank you, Mr. K," Lumian said sincerely.

He pondered for a moment before proceeding, "The death of Guillaume Bénet might trigger an intensified pursuit from the official Beyonders. I'm wondering if there exists a mystical item that would suit my needs, enabling me to alter my appearance and stature at will?"

He was seeking a means to assume Aurore's identity, infiltrating the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society as Muggle.

Mr. K's tone shifted abruptly, infused with zeal.

"Only the Lifeblood I possess can accomplish what you seek. So long as you can master your flesh and blood, altering your height and appearance becomes attainable. While it may not provide an exact replica of your desires, it suffices to veil your true identity. The caveat lies in the necessity for early injection and its limited duration. You won't possess the liberty to transform at your whim."

Precision isn't required; members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society assume disguises, masking their true selves during gatherings... Yet, that falls short. A perceptive Spectator might notice something from Aurore's eyes or the contour of the chin. To fully pass off as Muggle and dupe everyone, the masked face must mirror Aurore's flawlessly... Plus, the adverse effects of Lifeblood are beyond my tolerance... Lumian's thoughts coalesced,

and he articulated his response.
"I'm concerned that administering Lifeblood could revert me to the most primordial human archetype. Despite the Lord's protection mitigating severe physical and mental consequences, the Iron and Blood Cross Order could easily detect the anomaly and discern my true allegiance."
Mr. K sighed in disappointment.
"That's a problem. Though I believe the Lord will safeguard you, preserving your devout persona from exposure, your concerns bear merit."
Having declined the offer of Lifeblood, Lumian continued, "Recently, the Iron and Blood Cross Order tasked me with an interaction..."
He detailed Gardner Martin's summons, narrating until the culmination of the King's Pie game.
The sole omission was Termiboros's warning, the reason subtly placed on his intricate grasp of mysticism. A niggling suspicion prodded him to sidestep the matter, avoiding any potential anomalies.
Mr. K listened attentively, refraining from interjection. As Lumian concluded, Mr. K stood and paced the room.
"Your next objective is to figure out the Iron and Blood Cross Order's rationale for engaging the Sauron family. Are they coveting the Saurons' inheritance or considering collaboration?"
"Yes, Mr. K." Lumian recognized the need for him to remain well-informed, irrespective of Mr. K's order.
Mr. K halted his pacing, fixing his gaze on Lumian.
"Your intuition is sound. Should any mishap occur within that game, it could set off a mystical catastrophe.
"The central figure of Poufer's sacrifice, Vermonda Sauron, held significant standing within the Sauron royal family of that era. Born into the Champagne lineage, he was adopted into the main family by King Odo the 12th, who invested resources in his upbringing.
"Vermonda began auspiciously but met a negative end. His later years saw him vanish without a trace, dealing a heavy blow to the Sauron dynasty. In the ensuing two decades, several prominent Sauron family members met untimely and mysterious deaths, or succumbed to sudden insanity. The family's power dwindled, paving the way for Roselle's eventual overthrow."
Emperor Roselle's successful usurpation of the Sauron Dynasty was partly facilitated by the apparent decline of the ancient royal line? Vermonda's inexplicable disappearance spanned two to three centuries. How could today's sacrifice catalyze a dangerous

mystical shift? Lumian's thoughts raced, absorbing the details recounted by Mr. K.

...

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Jenna, having gleaned some insights from the Purifiers, sought out Franca in hopes of sharing her findings.

As her gaze roamed the room, Jenna's attention was drawn to the slightly ajar master bedroom door, from which emanated a rhythmic tapping sound.

"Franca?" she called.

Franca's clear voice resounded.

"I'm here! Come inside."

Jenna, who had never entered Franca's bedroom, hesitated for a moment before walking over and pushing open the door.

A burst of amazement brightened her blue eyes as they fell upon an intricate apparatus nestled against the wall, distant from the window.

The contraption consisted of a myriad of interlocking gears encircling brass cylinders, interconnected through levers, crankshafts, and screws.

In awe, Jenna regarded the towering device and inquired, "What is this?"

Seated before the elaborate mechanism, Franca's fingers danced across a state-of-the-art mechanical typewriter as she proudly introduced it to her companion, "This is a third-generation difference engine, cleverly modified—a sort of analyzer. It's a truncated version, simplified and miniaturized. The complete model wouldn't fit in my room."

"Are you really a believer of the God of Steam and Machinery?" Jenna blurted out.

Franca chuckled and explained, "Sometimes."

Jenna's scrutiny lingered on the so-called analyzer, revealing the connection of a telegraph machine and two metallic mechanical typewriters at its lower end.

It wasn't long before Franca ceased her typing, and the analyzer's mechanical appendage set the second typewriter into motion, producing letters upon pristine paper. The energy and information seemed to flow from the radio transceiver.

"What... what are you doing?" Jenna felt illiterate.

Franca happily pointed at the analyzer and said, "When the coding remains consistent, this contraption can automatically decode telegrams and codes for me. Through the metallic fingers linked to the mechanical typewriter's keypad, it types the corresponding letters, shaping the intended words.

"In essence, I can directly read the content of telegrams. No need to laboriously decode the encrypted messages I receive. It saves me considerable time and effort.
"Likewise, I can draft telegrams in standard language. The machine will autonomously encode them and transmit them via a predetermined radio frequency."
Studying the gears as they turned in their various states, Jenna struggled to grasp Franca's intent.
"But what's the purpose?" she asked, befuddled.
Franca was caught off guard.
"Purpose? Well, the purpose is to simplify telegram conversations. Make it something mundane and routine. Though admittedly, it does consume quite a bit of paper."
"Telegram conversations?" Jenna felt a touch of perplexity.
Franca had constructed such an intricate apparatus and embarked on such an elaborate matter simply for conversation?
The late-night typewriter sounds were Franca engaged in casual chatting?
"Exactly," Franca affirmed with a self-satisfied grin. "A friend of mine in the Loen military agreed to share the information Anthony Reid seeks during that timeframe. We just had a brief exchange."
While Franca could easily request the pertinent information from Madam Judgment, she preferred not to burden her Major Arcana cardholder unless absolutely necessary.
As Franca finished speaking, the analyzer completed its task of typewriting, and the telegram materialized in Intisian.
Snatching the paper, Franca's countenance darkened as she scanned its contents.
...
At night, in Apartment 601.
Lumian, Anthony Reid, Franca, and Jenna reassembled.
Waving the paper in her grip, Franca addressed Anthony Reid, stating, "I've received a response. The Loen military's official report on the encounter states: No such battle occurred!"
"No such battle occurred?" Anthony Reid's eyes widened as he jolted to his feet.
No battle at all? Lumian arched an eyebrow.
Such a response was undeniably unexpected.
Franca nodded gently, her gaze fixed on Anthony Reid.
"To put it simply, it's highly probable that the assault against you and your companions was not executed by the Loen army!"

Chapter 344: Boxing Gloves

"Not by the Loen army..." Anthony Reid muttered under his breath, his eyes distant.

The night of the attack had haunted his dreams, replaying over and over, each iteration etching the brutality and mercilessness of the Loen soldiers into his consciousness. These nightmares had grown, evolving into an inescapable nightmare. And now, shockingly, someone was telling him that they were not Loen soldiers!

Franca's demeanor, the subtle shifts in her expressions and body language—it all told him that Franca wasn't lying; she wasn't bluffing him!

This revelation rendered his years of suffering, of misattributed blame, into a cruel jest.

As a Psychiatrist, Anthony Reid was acutely attuned to the waves of disillusionment that crashed through his psyche. His emotional stability quivered, struck by a potent aftershock.

Instinctively, he used Placate on himself.

As Anthony Reid struggled to "save" himself, Franca elaborated, "Either the battle's secrecy is of the highest order, barring my Loenese friend from obtaining the truth for now, or a different faction entirely orchestrated the assault on your unit."

Her inclination leaned toward the latter possibility. In the grand scheme of the Loen Kingdom, this skirmish was a minor one. Anthony's company held no strategic value, no pivotal figures, so there was no reason for a high-level concealment.

"Who could it be?" Jenna had already raised this question after reading the telegram, but both of them couldn't come up with a reasonable answer.

She even speculated that an Instigator might have sowed seeds of internal discord amidst the Intis army to digest a potion. This made one of the companies impersonate as Loenese soldiers, launching a deadly nocturnal assault on Anthony Reid and his comrades.

However, this was far too difficult. No matter how formidable an Instigator was, there was no hope of success unless Anthony Reid's company had discovered evidence of someone's serious crimes or formed a deep feud with other companies due to conflicts on the battlefield.

"Indeed, who could it be..." Anthony Reid, now more composed thanks to his Placate, intoned with a voice etched in determination.

He understood why the Loen army would attack him and his

comrades—their animosity, though intense, was comprehensible within the context of war. But an attack from an unknown faction? That puzzled him.
Franca pondered for a moment and said, "Did your unit forsake allies on the battlefield? Or perhaps lay claim to spoils of war that weren't rightfully yours?"
Anthony Reid ruminated briefly before shaking his head resolutely. "No."
Lumian chimed in with conviction, "Absolutely not. This ties back to Hugues Artois. It can't be a squabble between comrades or external rivals."
Jenna, absorbed in contemplation, posed another question, "Did you defy Hugues Artois's orders? Or did your actions inadvertently cost him something?"
Anthony Reid shook his head again.
"If I had, I wouldn't have grappled with years of puzzlement."
Silence enveloped Apartment 601, a contemplative hush broken only by Lumian's recollection. A shard of Madam Magician's prior words tugged at his thoughts, and he ventured,
"Could it be a sacrificial rite? A blood offering to an evil god?"
Madam Magician had mentioned that Sinners, a secret organization devoted to evil gods, emerged in the war's later phases. The conflict had unwittingly provided opportunities for these evil gods to infiltrate the realm. Could Anthony Reid and his comrades have stumbled upon one of these opportunities?
"Blood sacrifice..." Franca and Jenna recalled the support various evil god factions had given Hugues Artois.
Had he forged an alliance with these heretics? Did he sacrifice his own company?
Anthony Reid fell silent for a moment before saying, "The heretics, disguised as the Loen army, orchestrated our annihilation with Hugues Artois's complicity?"
Franca said insightfully, "It's the most logical explanation, though the question remains—who gains? Certainly not Hugues Artois. He reaped no boons, not even in death."
For a moment, no one could answer Franca's question.
After a few seconds, Lumian said, "That's one of the avenues we must delve into as we proceed. It might intertwine with Hugues Artois's ascent to power and his parliamentary role."
Upon hearing this, Jenna recounted the information she had obtained from the Purifiers and concluded, "The pressing issue lies in the fact that General Philip, who seems the most suspicious, is already deceased. It's as if all the threads converge at a sudden dead-end."

"He died just in time." Franca chuckled. "A pre-emptive elimination, perhaps?"
Lumian stroked his chin and spoke slowly, "In the world of mysticism, certain deaths don't necessarily mean true demise."
Madam Justice had mentioned that an evil god's boon had a Deceased Sequence. They could use death to escape their original fate.
Similarly, if General Philip had used the Substitution Spell, the one who died might not be the real him.
Franca, who had previously helped with finishing Guillaume Bénet, immediately understood.
"Substitution Spell?"
"We cannot dismiss the possibility." Lumian smiled. "Our immediate objective remains the investigation of General Philip, ascertaining the truth of his demise. Even if he is truly dead, there may be traces he left behind, undiscovered by the Purifiers due to the constraints imposed on them."
Anthony Reid, though still grappling with the shattering revelations, felt the warmth of unity and purpose in his companions' discourse. It bolstered his resolve, a spark of renewed determination igniting within him.
He nodded slightly and said, "There's no need to rush. This matter must be very complicated. I'll first gather preliminary information about General Philip, his family, and friends."
After Anthony Reid took his leave, Lumian observed Franca preparing to head to Rue des Fontaines in search of Gardner Martin, so he left Apartment 601 with her.
As they walked down the stairs, Lumian broached the subject of his conversation with Hela, sharing the details with Franca.
Her excitement burgeoned as she absorbed his words, a fervor building within her.
"Great! Great! Quickly transform into Muggle. Let's make contact with April Fool's together!"
"Why are you so excited?" Lumian glanced at him.
Franca made a tongue-clicking sound and chuckled.
"Back home, there's a saying that goes— if you get drenched in the rain, rip up someone else's umbrella. Haha, it's all in jest, but isn't it interesting? Even though your appearance leans towards masculinity, a few simple adjustments can render you strikingly beautiful. Once the Pyromaniac potion has been digested, have you not considered having a potion of Pleasure? Sigh, forget it. There's still some risk before reaching Sequence 4."
Laughter and jesting flowed between them, Franca's demeanor then taking a more serious turn as they reached the street

"Furthermore, you're one of the few people I can trust now. If I could obtain your direct collaboration in our probe of the April Fool's conundrum, I'd feel significantly more secure. Unfortunately..."
"Unfortunately..." Lumian echoed the sentiment, a tinge of regret shading his words.
His curiosity then led him to inquire about Emperor Roselle and the perplexing attitudes of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members.
Franca's expression turned strange, as if she struggled to suppress a bout of laughter.
After a moment, she exhaled and said, "This matter is quite complicated. It's difficult to explain in a few words. I'll explain in detail tomorrow or the day after tomorrow when I'm free. In short, be mentally prepared."
"How complicated can it be?" Lumian muttered. He bade Franca farewell and commenced his journey toward Rue Anarchie.
Upon reaching Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré, despite having already deciphered the issue with Aurore's grimoires and no longer needing to delve into them, Lumian's habits dictated that he retrieve the copies and skim through their contents, his thoughts wandering amidst the scattered pages.
Approaching midnight, a stirring within Lumian's heart drew his gaze toward the carbide lamp.
The light it emitted bore a dark green hue.
The "doll" messenger, clad in a light-gold dress, suddenly materialized. It glared coldly at Lumian, as if striving to contain its emotions.
With twin thuds, a pair of iron-black boxing gloves, adorned with multiple short thorns, landed soundlessly on the table. The impact carried a resonance more akin to wood meeting wood than metal striking wood.
Simultaneously, a folded sheet of paper drifted toward Lumian.
"Thank you." Although the "doll" messenger quickly vanished, Lumian still expressed his gratitude politely.
He refrained from touching the boxing gloves for now, opting to unfold the piece of paper and peruse the contents of Madam Magician's message.
"The Shadow Branch and the Lucky One Beyonder characteristic have been made into a mystical item.
"How does it fare? Has its form been modified, rendering it more convenient for transport? This is a masterpiece forged by a master.
"It remains nameless for now. With common words, you could dub it the 'Lucky Shadow Boxing Glove.' For a touch of panache, 'Flog'

could be a stylish choice. The name is yours to determine.
"Any target struck by this glove, regardless of creating injuries, whether they defend with a weapon or not, will undergo a surge of desire or emotion. The specific emotion hinges on your luck. Yet, with the presence of Lucky One, you can envision or simulate the corresponding desires and emotions ahead of time, guiding the target's reaction. The success rate stands impressively high—around 70 to 80%.
"Following the trigger of a target's desires or emotions, a second strike won't engender new feelings. Instead, there's a likelihood of causing the pre-existing desires or emotions to erupt. This unleashes an overwhelming tidal wave on most targets, inflicting significant harm, even rendering them temporarily incapacitated.
"While the likelihood of invoking desire or emotion with each hit isn't substantial, repetitive blows will eventually yield the desired outcome—unless you are cursed with bad luck that counteracts the influence of Lucky One.
"However, the glove's most exceptional facet isn't its offensive potential, but its defensive capabilities. It possesses unparalleled sturdiness, capable of withstanding an assault from a Reaper without incurring any damage. (Note: Reaper refers to Sequence 5 of the Hunter pathway.) Naturally, this hinges on the attack squarely targeting the glove. In such a scenario, there's even a possibility of taking a strike infused with godhood, at the expense of shattering or fracturing the glove. This probably places the glove at Sequence 4.
"On the downside, carrying the glove will erode your self-control, intensifying the oscillations of various desires and emotions. Withstanding this requires exceptional endurance. Moreover, while donning the glove, you will attract the attention of a hidden entity since it originated from the Tree of Shadow. While They cannot directly harm you for various reasons, They can summon dangerous entities to your vicinity, influencing or attacking you.
"Hence, each use of the boxing gloves should be accompanied by a change of location, and their usage should not be for extended periods. Failure to adhere to these guidelines may attract hidden dangers. However, should you maintain your composure and endure one or two attacks, the world will expel those dangerous entities who can't truly descend here.
"Ah, one last detail—your two Psychiatrists request a final follow-up consultation at the usual time tomorrow afternoon."

Chapter 345: Dream

I need exceptional endurance to withstand the weakening of self-control brought about by carrying the Flog. The waves of various desires and emotions surge stronger... Alms Monk excels in handling such situations... While reading Madam Magician's letter, Lumian swiftly considered if he could fulfill the conditions for using the mystical item.

Naturally, he didn't have to keep the Flog boxing gloves with him to employ them. Lumian could position them in advance and entice the enemy into an ambush before revealing them. Alternatively, he could accumulate enough resources to purchase a steam robot and have emotionless tools carry the gloves for him. Nevertheless, thanks to Alms Monk's abilities in managing adverse effects, he didn't need to resort to such complicated strategies.

With this in mind, Lumian recollected the adverse effects of Contractee contracts.

A substantial portion of them seemed to be mitigated by Alms Monk's resilience and self-restraint.

First acquiring the Alms Monk boon prior to becoming a Contractee. Could it be that one must bolster their endurance to endure a contract? Otherwise, the padre with over ten negative effects would have self-destructed long ago...

Yes, Guillaume Bénet's utilization of Alms Monk and Ascetic powers wasn't overly adept. Could this stem from his ingrained indulgence, making change difficult? Or did he leap directly into being a Contractee before evolving into a Fate Appropriator? His grasp of the Alms Monk and Ascetic boons seemed inadequate, relying largely on instinct. Lumian murmured to himself.

Recalling how the padre in the dream transformed from an ordinary individual to a Fate Appropriator within a day, Lumian was more inclined to believe the latter possibility. He surmised that the events in the dream marked Guillaume Bénet's advancement to a Fate Appropriator with only two to three boons.

Lumian redirected his attention to the letter in his hand and read through the remainder in one go.

Concerning the utilization of the Flog boxing gloves to attract perilous creatures, he intended to seize an opportunity and approach Franca for assistance to verify the precise circumstances. If indeed hazardous, he would need to contemplate reserving one usage of spirit world traversal to escape any future influence or attack.

Crimson flames silently surged, setting the letter ablaze, its words turning to ash.

Amidst the dispersed ashes, Lumian reached out his hand toward the iron-black boxing gloves.
Although they lacked the metallic texture and chilliness, they were exceptionally rigid.
Almost in unison, two voices resonated in Lumian's mind:
One was the voice of the eloping couple, casting curses; the other was the voice of inebriated individuals shattering bottles and clamoring in the street.
The former set Lumian's imagination ablaze, while the latter spurred him to draw his revolver and open fire.
The sensations weren't overpowering and could be endured and repressed.
After confirming the fit of the boxing gloves, Lumian set them beside the pillow.
...
In the depths of night, in a hazy state, Lumian felt as though he had stepped into an ancient beige castle. Its exterior bore numerous dark and crimson stains, as if drenched in a copious amount of blood.
Hysterical laughter and shouts reverberated from within the castle. Lumian instinctively raised his gaze and spotted a deep-red visage peering at him through a narrow window on the third floor.
Their eyes met, and suddenly, the man raised his right hand and cruelly gouged out his reddish-brown eyes.
Fine blood vessels detached from their sockets, leaving behind a pair of inky-black, blood-soaked cavities.
"Hahaha! Hahaha!" The eyeless man chortled with a maddened demeanor.
Lumian's thoughts blurred as he involuntarily stepped into the ancient castle.
What unfurled before his eyes were gruesome scenes: The maid rent her abdomen with a dining knife, drawing forth pallid intestines marred by blood. The valets ascended the staircase to the second floor, only to throw themselves back into the hall, repeating their falls in a macabre cycle. The butler clutched a comely female head, his lower body severed. He dragged himself with his elbows, leaving behind a broad and extended trail of blood. The headless mistress sat in an armchair, lifted her cup of coffee, and poured it into the gash on her neck...
The pungent stench of blood and the frenzied ambiance pierced Lumian's mind, snapping his eyes open.
He beheld the familiar, squalid ceiling and caught the ceaseless nocturnal clamor of Rue Anarchie.
Had it all been a dream? The scene from his dream lingered in

Lumian's memory, a residual unease remaining.
As a Beyonder seasoned with the world of mysticism, he didn't underestimate such a dream.
It likely bore the marks of a revelation through Astral Projection or an external influence.
Swiftly reviewing the day's occurrences, Lumian zeroed in on two potential "culprits."
Could it be the lingering effects of the King's Pie game from earlier, or perhaps linked to the impact of the Flog boxing gloves?
He cast a glance at the iron-black spiked boxing gloves, left untouched beside his pillow, sensing that the game was the likely trigger.
An attempt to commune with Termiboros yielded no response.
After securing the Flog boxing gloves within a drawer in his wooden table, Lumian drifted back into slumber.
Throughout that night, nightmares plagued him repeatedly. Each instance, he encountered the bizarre ancient castle.
Fortunately, the dream's lucidity waned progressively, eventually melding into a commonplace nightmare.
...
The following morning, Lumian adhered to his routine of jogging and practicing boxing, then set out in search of a distinctive breakfast in the bustling market district.
After spending nearly the entirety of the morning at Salle de Bal Brise, he eventually found himself standing before Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
With a flush on her face and a lively demeanor, Franca answered the door. "You're quite the eager one."
Lumian was forthright about his intentions.
"Remember you mentioned wanting to discuss Emperor Roselle with me?"
"Well, well..." Franca's expression shifted oddly once more.
She grumbled, "I'm feeling unwell!"
"What sort of ailment?" Lumian found it hard to believe that the Demoness of Pleasure could fall ill.
As Franca led him to the living room, she muttered, "It's empathetic embarrassment!"
Lumian shut the door and took a seat on the sofa. After a moment's thought, he inquired, "Is this embarrassment on behalf of Emperor Roselle?"
"Exactly." Franca, seated cross-legged in a recliner, scratched her flaxen hair. "I'm seriously concerned that he might be so mortified that he'll rise from the grave to strangle anyone who's privy to the information!"

After a rather odd comment, Franca sighed and explained, "In simpler terms, Emperor Roselle, like us, hails from another world."
"Emperor Roselle is also one of the transmigrators you mentioned?" Lumian blurted out in astonishment.
Franca confirmed succinctly, "Many of his inventions, beliefs, and ideas originated in our world. What's more significant, his diary was penned in the language of the nation your sister and I come from. That's why it remained undeciphered for so long until our transmigration."
Lumian's mind was a whirlwind of confusion. It all seemed too fantastical, like something out of fiction. However, Aurore's attitude toward Emperor Roselle and his diary lent credence to Franca's words.
Seeing his silence, Franca added with understanding, "Nonetheless, he's an extraordinary individual. Progressing from a mere Sequence 9 individual, he ascended the paths of the divine step by step, overthrowing the Sauron Dynasty and enacting monumental changes upon Intis and the world. His impact on the history of the past two to three centuries and generations of humanity is profound."
That's true. Emperor Roselle once said that a hero is a hero, irrespective of their origins... Where Emperor Roselle came from was immaterial... Lumian quickly collected his thoughts and asked with curiosity, "Did Emperor Roselle's famous quotations originate from philosophers in your world?"
"Many of them did." Franca, in a way, supported her fellow countryman's public image. "But some are genuinely his own. Consider this: a person who's undergone so much, tasted both triumph and failure, must possess unique insights across various domains. He's not lacking in memorable sayings."
Now I understand why Aurore chuckles whenever I mention something Emperor Roselle said... A realization dawned on Lumian. He grasped his sister's sentiments at that moment and the jesting tone the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society adopted toward the Emperor.
He then inquired, "Did one of you write Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles?"
"Yes, but I'm unsure who the author is," Franca honestly admitted. "The writer possesses quite the literary talent."
"Is everything in there accurate?" Lumian contemplated seeking out an underground bookseller to procure a copy.
Franca chuckled. "About half of it. Even among the portions based on actual events, half of that is a sensationalized expansion of a couple sentences from the Emperor's diary into a narrative rife

with explicit details. For instance, the Emperor once shared more than just friendship with a Demoness..."
Franca suddenly paused.
Realization dawned upon her that she herself was now a Demoness.
A worthwhile addition to my collection... Emperor Roselle does seem to live up to the legendary reputation of being a flirt... Lumian's anticipation for the underground book grew.
He opted not to delve further into the topic of the Emperor and the Demoness. Instead, he brought up the King's Pie game from the prior day and the subsequent nightmarish dreams. He then sought Franca's insights as an adept practitioner of divination.
"What revelations are hidden in that dream?"
"I can't decipher it," Franca said after a prolonged pause. "It conveys a sense of danger and advises to stay away. Also, those nightmares appear to be lingering effects from some form of insanity."
Lumian contemplated for a moment, deciding not to probe deeper for the time being. He planned to consult the two Psychiatrists later in the day.
...
At 3:20 p.m., Lumian reached Mason Café in Quartier du Jardin Botanique and took a seat in Booth D. He requested a cup of aromatic Intis coffee and two cream-filled cupcakes.
Once the coffee and confections were served, he patiently waited for a minute or so before catching the sound of Susie's gentle, feminine voice.
"Good afternoon, Mr. Lumian Lee."
Lumian responded with an easy smile.
"Good afternoon, Madam Susie. Good afternoon, Madam Justice."

Chapter 346: Follow-Up Visit

"How did you know I was here?" Madam Justice's voice held a smile.

Lumian gazed at the chair across from him and responded, a grin tugging at his lips, "Can't hurt to extend a greeting."

Susie steered the conversation forward, "Congratulations on completing the initial phase of your vendetta. Care for a brief discussion?"

"No problem." Lumian's composure remained unshaken, not even flinching at the mention of "vendetta."

Of course, part of his calm demeanor stemmed from the fact that he hadn't brought along the Flog boxing gloves. This was a psychological evaluation, after all. He couldn't allow external influences to taint his thoughts and skew the doctor's judgment.

From the point of seeking assistance and crafting a strategy, he recounted his experiences of the past two days. He glossed over the secret of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society but provided a concise account of everything else.

Following a momentary silence, Susie's soothing voice resumed its course.

"Your mental state has held up admirably. A certain degree of overreaction in specific scenarios is par for the course. Psychiatric therapy doesn't strip a person of their emotions or feelings. Instead, it aids in unburdening oneself, fostering reconciliation, and discovering inner resilience. Nightmares won't deal a devastating blow to you any longer. Otherwise, according to the more dubious therapists who advocate severing the frontal lobe for eternal tranquility, you'll forever be at peace."

"Removing the frontal lobe?" Lumian's ears caught wind of this concept for the first time.

Susie's tone tinged with revulsion.

"It's a notion that has cropped up in the last couple of years. It doesn't yield the intended outcomes; rather, it inflicts grave harm upon the patient. There's an evident malevolence behind this treatment proposal. It's as if some callous individual propagated it with the sole intention of making a mockery out of medical professionals and those seeking solace."

A prank that toys with the lives of others? Lumian shifted gears, steering the conversation onto a different course.

"Madam Susie, you haven't even delved into my emotions or analyzed my thoughts, yet you've already deduced that I've made some strides towards recovery, and a follow-up might not be necessary?"

Susie's demeanor lifted rapidly, and she replied with a grin, "At times, a person's actions can be more telling of their psychological state than their thoughts. Understand that humans excel at deceiving themselves. They concoct a slew of rationales for their actions, which often stand less grounded in reality than their deeds. To decipher an accurate psychological portrait from this labyrinth of complex and contradictory thoughts requires meticulous analysis. But such scrutiny can easily unearth problems. Hence, I chose to commence with an examination of your actions.

"Evidently, whether you're willing to admit it or not, you've successfully reestablished social connections and fostered a level of trust in others. You've also exhibited a willingness to extend your trust to others.

"Prior to your ambush of Guillaume Bénet, you demonstrated the capacity for calm contemplation and thorough preparation. While there were impulsive undertones and hints of macabre inclinations in your operation, they were inevitable. Their absence would only have hinted at more severe psychological turmoil. And once the affair concluded, you swiftly reverted to your norm and dived right back into life, embarking on another investigation.

"Grounded in the sequence of actions you've undertaken, I extend my congratulations. The pronounced self-destructive tendencies have lost their grip, and you've truly extricated yourself from the abyss of agony.

"Naturally, the pain won't dissipate entirely. It will wane and recede. Perhaps it might resurge abruptly in the future, once again occupying your mind. Yet, there's no need to succumb to panic. Armed with this period of experience, I trust you're equipped to navigate it adeptly. Psychologically speaking, this signals a path to recovery.

"In similar fashion, the past invariably leaves its imprints upon us. Your self-destructive propensities, your extremities, your pathological behaviors—no doubt they're more potent than in most individuals, but they all abide by the bounds of reason and normalcy."

In response, Lumian let out a slow exhale and murmured, "I sense it myself, honestly. The present me is an entirely different person from the one who initially set foot in Trier.

"Thank you, Madam Susie. Thank you, Madam Justice."

He realized that his transformation from an initial state of apathy was thanks to the efforts of these two psychiatrists and his escapades in the market district. The prospect of death itself had lost its sting. He had shifted from a vindictive malevolent specter

to an individual fueled by an ardent thirst for retribution, driven by a potent desire for action.

"In essence, this is your own redemption." Susie's tone brimmed with a delight not present before. "The primary contributors to this turnaround are none other than yourself and your sister, Aurore. Were it not for the tiniest ember of hope that you harbored, coupled with your will to persist, and were it not for Miss Aurore gifting you nearly six years of cherished moments to savor and to mold your thoughts, we might not have been able to reel you back in."

As Lumian processed these words, a montage of scenes flickered across his mind: Aurore inhaling deeply, using the breaths to temper the vexation derived from instructing him. The tempestuous storms of combat training, coupled with her impromptu "attacks." The two of them ensconced in the study, each absorbed in their respective books, relishing the tranquility of the night. And, as the number one experimental subject, he was obligated to consume the culinary reproductions of food back home that his sister conjured, be they successes or failures...

Lumian's expression softened as he recollected a line from his sister's novel: The joy and pain of days past are equal to the me of the present.

After a pause lasting more than ten seconds, he straightened in his seat and queried, "Were last night's nightmares all rooted in the King's Pie game?"

This time, it was Madam Justice who responded, her voice soft with understanding, "Indeed. Considering the current situation, it's likely that you were mentally corrupted during that time."

"Mental corruption? Does it actually involve Beyonder powers?" Lumian asked with genuine curiosity.

Madam Justice replied, "Ordinarily, the simple act of sacrificing a King's Pie wouldn't have yielded any results. Otherwise, the game wouldn't have remained a popular tradition in Intis for centuries, fading into obscurity only after the establishment of the Republic. Only a handful of families still recall it."

"Yes, that's what I assumed back then. Poufer didn't employ any mystical language or invoke a complete honorific name. It's implausible for the sacrifice to succeed," Lumian concurred.

Madam Justice continued, "Nevertheless, exceptions exist—sacrificers who share blood ties with the subject of the sacrifice and exhibit numerous similarities.

"If you participate frequently in Poufer's King's Pie game and repeatedly endure the mental corruption it entails, the ramifications won't dissolve with a mere spate of nightmares.

Rather, before they fully dissipate, they'll progressively warp your psyche and lead you into madness."
"Could the content of these nightmares be symbolic?" Lumian inquired succinctly.
Madam Justice's response flowed measuredly.
"It's highly probable that they're a fusion of specific deranged occurrences from your past, projected into your dreamscape through the taint of corruption."
"So, that ancient castle and those deranged individuals could really exist..." Lumian mused, nodding in contemplation.
As Lumian engaged in a conversation with Justice and Susie for a while, he intuited that the day's follow-up session was drawing to a close.
In that instance, Madam Justice took the lead, saying, "Didn't I mention previously that I might require your assistance with something?"
"Of course, no problem," Lumian swiftly agreed.
Consider it the cost of the psychiatric treatment!
Moreover, he held the belief that Madam Justice wouldn't have entrusted him with the task without assessing his capabilities. The endeavor couldn't be excessively dangerous.
Madam Justice chuckled and said, "Should you succeed, I shall bestow an additional reward upon you, one that will cater to your requirements in a specific manner."
"Something capable of altering my appearance?" Lumian's heart skipped a beat with excitement.
"Something along those lines." Madam Justice's initially gentle tone turned solemn. "I'm hoping you can venture to an ancient tomb situated on the fourth floor of Trier's catacombs, specifically to retrieve a vial of the Samaritan Women's Spring for me."
Samaritan Women's Spring? Lumian was taken aback.
Madame Hela had previously mentioned that she had journeyed to Trier in pursuit of an artifact hidden deep within the catacombs. Concurrently, she had inquired about the legend surrounding the Samaritan Women's Spring!
Wasn't this too much of a coincidence?
Almost as if she sensed his thoughts, Madam Justice chimed in with a smile, "Don't you find it too coincidental?
"Yes, what I'm hoping for is that you can leverage Madame Hela's exploration to assist me in securing some Samaritan Women's Spring water. Doing so yourself might yield slim chances of success.
"In truth, I could 'arrange' for you to undertake this task in a more clandestine manner, but that approach contradicts my philosophy

and principles. I still require face-to-face communication with you and your explicit consent for such matters. I'm disinclined to ensnare you passively through covert cues to fulfill my objectives.
"For me, indulging in the manipulation of others' minds is a treacherous endeavor.
"Of course, honesty is also an effective way at influencing others' thoughts."
Lumian's skepticism and doubts gradually ebbed away. He inquired, perplexed, "Madam Justice, given that you possess a general awareness of the Samaritan Women's Spring's approximate location, why wouldn't you retrieve it yourself? Why involve a Sequence 7 Beyonder like me?"
The Tarot Club's Major Arcana card was definitely a demigod, countless times stronger than him!
Madam Justice laughed.
"To put it succinctly, certain locales become progressively hazardous with an increase in Sequence."
A location where higher Sequences meet with increased danger? Lumian found this notion confounding.
Madam Justice added, "As Sequences rise, proximity to the Oldest One increases, accumulating more madness along the way. Consequently, individuals in higher Sequences are more susceptible to particular forms of corruption.
"Hela is also beneficial in this matter. At the very least, this approach will save her time and permit her to narrow down her search to a designated area."
After a brief contemplation, Lumian agreed to Madam Justice's request. From her, he gleaned the approximate location of the Samaritan Women's Spring—situated within the westernmost ancient tomb on the fourth floor of the catacombs.
...
Following the session, Lumian made his way back to Rue des Blouses Blanches in the market district, his objective being the retrieval of the Flog boxing gloves from the iron cabinet.
Upon his arrival at the safe house, an odd inkling settled upon him.
Intrusion!
Someone had infiltrated his safe house!
Lumian's heart tightened as he advanced with purpose, unlatching the iron cabinet.
While observing that Aurore's grimoires and the Flog boxing gloves remained, a sigh of relief escaped him involuntarily.
However, he proceeded to conduct a thorough inspection, and his scrutiny bore fruit. One article was conspicuously absent—the

Earth Blood ore was gone!

Chapter 347: Strange Theft

Looking at the open iron cabinet, Lumian found it absurd and surreal.

The thief had entered the house without taking the most valuable Flog boxing glove, nor did they flip through Aurore's grimoires to see if there were any banknotes inside. They had only taken a mineral specimen that didn't look like a gem at all.

Disregarding the traps, if the thief were truly a Marauder with Beyonder powers, he wouldn't have given up on the boxing gloves made of unique materials and capable of powerful abilities. If he were just an ordinary thief, he wouldn't have just taken the Earth Blood ore. He might have even casually thrown the seemingly worthless item to the ground.

All of this led Lumian to suspect that the thieving intruder had only one motive: take away the Earth Blood ore!

The other party clearly knew what was special about the mineral specimen and was attempting to exploit it!

"Termiboros, who stole the Earth Blood ore?" Lumian couldn't identify any suspect no matter how hard he thought.

Apart from dealing with Guillaume Bénet a few days ago when he retrieved the Earth Blood ore and handed it to Franca, he kept the mineral specimen in the safe house. He never carried it with him to avoid being targeted.

Of course, the thief might have divined or prophesied to narrow down the area. He searched every room and finally found the target item.

Termiboros's magnificent voice suddenly resounded.

"I don't know."

Don't know... Lumian was alarmed.

This answer was meaningless, but coming from Termiboros meant many things.

While Termiboros, sealed within Lumian's body, couldn't exert any direct power, his angelic nature granted Him unique insights. As an angel of the Inevitability domain, He possessed an uncanny ability to detect problems and traces that eluded many Low-Sequence Beyonders through Low-Sequence Beyonders's eyes and fate.

But now, He claimed ignorance!

This revelation carried significant weight, suggesting that whoever had stolen the Earth Blood ore was no ordinary individual. It hinted at the involvement of a high-level power, possibly tied to a secret organization or cult.

Hiss, I have to write a letter and inform Madam Magician about

this. After all, she once predicted that the Earth Blood ore would bring me some misfortune. However, the item is lost before the misfortune arrived... Lumian had initially hesitated to burden his Major Arcana card holder with this matter, as he didn't attach much value to the mineral specimen. Its applications were limited, and its loss seemed inconsequential. However, with the situation taking a bizarre turn, he couldn't simply dismiss it.

In the world of mysticism, negligence often led to painful lessons.

Truth be told, Lumian didn't harbor anger over the loss of his possession, nor did he feel compelled to retrieve it. Though the Earth Blood ore might lead to fortuitous encounters, it remained an abstract concept, difficult to quantify or cherish.

Moreover, Madam Magician's warning of potential misfortune made him view its loss as a means to mitigate risk.

Lumian meticulously inspected the safe house once more, confirming that none of the traps had been triggered. Only the Earth Blood ore had vanished. He settled down to compose a letter.

This time, the summoned puppet messenger displayed a less frigid demeanor, no longer suppressing intense emotions.

In mere minutes, Madam Magician's response arrived, concise and to the point: "There's indeed something amiss in this matter. I can't identify the thief of the Earth Blood ore either. If you're not fearful, you can venture to the entrance of Salle de Bal Unique and seek anyone with a monocle in their right eye. Even if they aren't the culprits, they should possess knowledge of the suspect. If you find it too risky, exercise patience. Someone will inquire on your behalf."

Salle de Bal Unique... That makes sense. The Sequence preceding a swindler is Marauder. Could those monocle-wearing individuals hold sway over all the thieves wielding Beyonder powers in Trier? Lumian pondered this in silence.

Aurore's grimoires had mentioned that Marauder occupied Sequence 9 on one of the paths of the divine. Above Marauder was Swindler, and further up was Cryptologist.

After careful consideration, Lumian opted to wait for someone to inquire on his behalf. He had no immediate need for the Earth Blood ore.

The thought of Salle de Bal Unique, Monette, the monocle-wearing Islander swindler, and the swindlers who emulated his style sent shivers down his spine. He preferred to avoid any unnecessary contact for the time being.

After burning the letter, Lumian shifted his attention to the iron cabinet, the repository of Aurore's grimoires, Flog boxing gloves, and various other items.

The once-secure safe house had become compromised, and he needed to find a new location for these possessions.
I'll take Flog with me. I'll carry the rest if I can, and sell what's sellable. If not, I'll secure another safe house... For Aurore's grimoires and the gold, I'll rent an anonymous safe deposit box at a large bank for their safekeeping... When this property's current lease expires, I wouldn't renew it... Lumian had a clear strategy in mind.
His plan encompassed the items he couldn't easily transport or wished to part with, which primarily included the five ritualistic hides, in addition to Aurore's grimoires and his accumulated gold. Finding a new home for these items was a priority, along with securing another safe house for himself.
With these considerations in mind, Lumian began drafting a letter addressed to Hela.
In the letter, he revealed that he had acquired information about the approximate location of the Samaritan Women's Spring through a secretive channel. The information source had tasked him with venturing underground to retrieve a genuine bottle of water from the spring.
However, as Lumian was writing, he felt a sense of puzzlement.
It seemed unnecessary for him to be directly involved when he could have entrusted Hela with the task of obtaining the spring water on his behalf.
Madam Justice should have considered this. Why am I required to descend into the fourth level of the catacombs personally? Is it because of the perceived difficulty Hela might encounter in procuring the water by herself? She needs my assistance?
What's so special about me? Apart from the angel sealed within me, my Sequence isn't high...
Madame Hela's Sequence is relatively high. It's relatively dangerous for her to approach the Samaritan Women's Spring and she will be prone to madness. Am I responsible for monitoring her condition and awaken her if needed?
I previously believed that Madame Hela was at least a Sequence 4. She claimed she could resolve the Cordu problem before the descent ritual, but now it appears she hasn't ascended to a demigod. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to enter the fourth level of the catacombs, let alone approach the Samaritan Women's Spring... Does she possess a Grade 1 Sealed Artifact or a mystical item equivalent to a saint? Lumian combed through the entire situation and made some guesses and judgments.
Continuing to write, Lumian used the information provider's request as a pretext to express his personal desire to enter the

ancient tomb.
After the summoning ritual, the skull, crafted from pure silver and radiating a gentle glow, retrieved the letter and departed.
Before long, a messenger returned with Hela's response: "No problem. I'll meet you at the gates of the Death Empire at 4 p.m. tomorrow."
Phew... Lumian exhaled a sigh of relief, his body trembling with a mix of excitement and trepidation.
His adventurous spirit and penchant for experimentation had always defined him. The bizarre vanishing of the couple in the catacombs had etched a profound mark on his psyche.
...
The next morning, at 11 Rue des Fontaines.
Lumian dutifully arrived at Gardner Martin's villa and reported the details of his meeting with Count Poufer and the other Black Cat members.
Inside, Gardner Martin, unusually excited, sat behind his desk and spoke with a hint of joy,
"Despite your claim of lacking artistic inclination, your background allows you to converse with them effectively. That's precisely why I chose you instead of Albus.
"I was concerned you might not exhibit enough generosity, but you handled it admirably. You even sponsored them with 4,000 verl d'or on your first visit."
Gardner Martin, the Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, implied that Lumian's status as the younger brother of best-selling author Aurore Lee, even without artistic inclination, provided him with a wealth of insider knowledge about the scandals, grudges, and grievances within the literary and artistic circles.
Lumian, however, didn't waste any time and cut straight to the point. "What I don't understand is why the King's Pie game gave me a sense of danger. I even had a few nightmares last night."
Gardner Martin nodded thoughtfully.
"That's because Poufer is quite unique. He bears a striking resemblance to his ancestor, Vermonda. They share a strong blood connection, which allows them to bypass many crucial steps during a ritual."
"Has his ancestor turned into an evil spirit? How can he still accept sacrifices after centuries?" Lumian asked, basing his question on logical reasoning, without mentioning Mr. K's account.
Gardner Martin responded with solemnity, "That's something you should investigate when you approach Poufer. Don't worry; as long as you don't participate in the King's Pie game every two or three

days, the only aftereffect you'll experience is those nightmares. Keep that sense of danger intact and resist becoming a king. It's easier for you to become a king than anyone else, except for Poufer himself. If you're uncertain about making the right choice, let Poufer choose first."

The Iron and Blood Cross Order wants to uncover the whereabouts of the mysterious Vermonda Sauron, who has been missing for centuries? Heh heh, why didn't they warn me about the dangers of the King's Pie game beforehand and advise me to be the last to make a choice? Lumian suspected that Gardner Martin hadn't mentioned it to confirm a crucial matter.

...

In the afternoon, near the Trier Opera House, within a concealed quarry cave, Franca and Jenna, wearing half-masks, once again met the Warlock in the black robe.

He was the same client who had previously commissioned the investigation of the disappearance of the Deep Valley Cloister's gatekeeper.

Franca scanned their surroundings, her voice intentionally hoarse as she spoke,

"We've made some progress in our investigation regarding the disappearance of the Deep Valley Cloister's gatekeeper. We wish to discuss it with you privately."

The man fell silent for over ten seconds before finally nodding. "Very well."

Their iron-masked skeletal escort led them, along with the client, into a secluded "conversation room" within the quarry cave.

...

With an hour left until their agreed meeting time, Lumian equipped himself with a carbide lamp and entered the market district's corresponding entrance to Underground Trier.

Chapter 348: The Bustling Underground

The carbide lamp emitted a bluish-yellow light, casting an eerie glow over the tunnel, which was divided by stone pillars.

Lumian strolled casually, carrying a black canvas bag that had become popular among university students in recent years. Inside, he had stashed the Flog boxing gloves and a stack of white candles.

After conducting numerous experiments, Lumian had discovered that carrying them in his bag was less risky than tucking them into his shirt or pants pockets. While it didn't make a significant difference, it was still better than the alternative.

As he followed the route marked on Gardner Martin's map, leading him toward the underground of Quartier de l'Observatoire, Lumian suddenly perked up his ears, listening for signs of approaching footsteps.

A cacophony of faint footsteps echoed in the air, barely audible.

Lumian scanned the path ahead and to his right, unsure which route the unidentified group would take. To remain inconspicuous, he clambered up to a stone pillar supporting the tunnel's ceiling, extinguishing his carbide lamp, and disappeared into the shadows.

Before long, a group of men emerged.

Most of them wore tattered jackets or were shirtless, hunched over while carrying heavy crates. Over a dozen burly men, dressed in well-worn attire with sinister expressions, held various firearms and carbide lamps, interspersed throughout the group.

Smugglers... Lumian peered out, examining the crates illuminated by the smugglers' lights. They appeared to emit a metallic gleam.

Firearms or something else? He mumbled silently, observing the smuggling caravan as it entered the right tunnel.

As they advanced, possibly due to a shadow that moved too much like a human, one of the smugglers raised his gun, took aim, and fired.

With a resounding bang, the alarm ceased, and the group pressed onward.

Lumian clicked his tongue and shook his head, finding their reaction overly tense and excessive.

In Underground Trier, such actions could easily lead to trouble!

It was well known that aside from university students exploring and citizens cultivating mushrooms to eke out a living, most individuals venturing underground were not to be underestimated. The chances of encountering Beyonders were significantly higher below ground than on the surface. Firing upon any passerby could potentially provoke members of secret organizations, bestowed of evil gods, anti-government militants, or formidable cave

adventurers.
With this in mind, Lumian drew his revolver and squeezed the trigger in the direction of the smuggling caravan, which was about to disappear at the end of the tunnel to his right.
He wasn't aiming at anyone, just firing into the air.
Bang! The armed smugglers either spun around or scrambled for cover, unleashing a barrage of bullets at the crossroads.
However, Lumian was no longer concerned. He was already scaling the rock wall, almost reaching the top.
After exchanging gunfire with the empty air for a brief moment, the smugglers shifted their positions nervously, puzzled and flustered.
Lumian observed their backs and couldn't help but smile.
No need for thanks. Consider it a free lesson!
He leaped to the ground and relit his carbide lamp.
Smelling the lingering scent of gunpowder, Lumian grinned and holstered his revolver before continuing along his planned route.
A few minutes later, he came across a group of quarry police officers dressed in dark uniforms, armed with semi-automatic revolvers.
The officer leading the group, upon seeing Lumian's youthful appearance, backpack slung diagonally, and well-dressed attire, muttered under his breath, "Son of a bitch, why is it another college student!?"
He then exhaled loudly and asked, "Did you hear anything just now?"
"There was a gunfight over there. Bang, bang, bang. I wanted to go over and take a look, but I didn't dare," Lumian replied, concealing nothing about the smuggling caravan.
The quarry police officers exchanged glances and swiftly passed Lumian, sprinting toward the intersection.
...
In the "conversation" room.
Observing the iron-masked skeletal host's departure, the man dressed in Warlock attire turned his attention to Franca and Jenna and said,
"What did you discover? As I mentioned, you need to find the gatekeeper or his remains to claim your reward."
Jenna replied calmly, "We haven't really thought about payment yet. We believe the situation is more complex than you described.
"One night, we infiltrated the Deep Valley Quarry..."
Upon hearing the term "Deep Valley Quarry," the man, hidden under a hooded shadow, subtly lifted his gaze.
Franca keenly observed his body language.

She had consulted with Anthony Reid and knew the kind of subconscious reactions ordinary humans would exhibit in such situations.
The man's actions suggested he was highly sensitive to the mention of Deep Valley Quarry.
Only someone aware of the issue would react in such a way.
Jenna continued to recount their discoveries, including the cybernetic-eyed monk and the secret cave adorned with limbs.
The Warlock-dressed man remained composed, making no unnecessary movements. However, to Franca, this indicated that he understood the abnormality within Deep Valley Quarry.
After hearing Jenna's account, the man deliberately raised his voice and said, "I can't confirm if it's related to the gatekeeper's disappearance, but if you can enter the secret cave, capture a few photographs, or retrieve valuable items, I'm willing to offer half the payment upfront. Perhaps you'll find clues about the gatekeeper's whereabouts inside."
Do you take us for fools? Are you expecting us to take such a risk for a mere 10,000 verl d'or? Franca muttered silently.
Had this mysticism gathering not been organized by her friend, she would have found a way to tail the client and uncover his true identity. She could then extract more detailed information from him and have Jenna sell it to the Purifiers.
...
"Halt!
"The Death Empire lies ahead!"
Lumian once again found himself standing in front of the natural arch, adorned with a peculiar mix of white bones, sunflowers, and steam symbols carved into the stone.
Before he could reach for the pocket watch he had borrowed from Salle de Bal Brise to check the time, Hela, dressed in a mysterious widow's black robe with withered blonde hair, approached from the other side.
The woman nodded slightly and said, "Since you're already here, let's proceed ahead of schedule."
"Very well." Lumian opened his bag and produced two white candles.
After lighting them and handing one to Hela, he grinned and remarked, "Aren't you worried that the information I obtained about the Samaritan Women's Spring might be incorrect?"
"Success comes after numerous failures," Hela replied with icy detachment.
A chuckle escaped Lumian's lips.
"I thought you might say that failure is the mother of success."

"This isn't the Research Society," Hela replied tersely.
Lumian didn't waste any more time. He extinguished his carbide lamp and advanced toward the rocky arch, clutching the white candle, its flame now an intense orange.
As expected, a figure emerged from the shadows beyond the door.
The figure sported a blue vest and yellow pants, with gray hair and few wrinkles. His light-yellow eyes held a faint cloudiness, marking him as an elderly man.
The old man cast a disapproving look at the white candle in Lumian's hand and asked with a furrowed brow, "Didn't you find a guide?"
You... Not you guys? Lumian glanced at Hela out of the corner of his eye and realized that the candlelight around her had dimmed, as if it had been corroded by the underground darkness or shrouded in dense fog.
In this state, she appeared to have vanished from the tomb administrator's view.
Lumian flashed a smile at the old man.
"I don't require a guide. I've been to the tomb many times, though I'm more accustomed to entering through the Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative entrance. Don't worry, I remember all the taboos, and I won't deliberately break them."
The old man snapped, "You college students! Remember, exit before your candles burn out!"
With that, he stepped aside and disappeared into the darkness behind the door.
As Lumian passed through the rocky passage and entered the Death Empire, he turned to the aged tomb administrator and asked curiously, "Why can you hold a lit white candle?"
The tomb administrator's faintly turbid light-yellow eyes suddenly darkened, and an icy aura emanated from him.
In a deep voice, he replied, "I'm just stationed by the entrance, not venturing too deep."
Is that so? Lumian, who had already entered the catacombs, rationally abandoned any further inquiry. He focused on the chill in his heart and the unseen gazes from the surrounding darkness.
He couldn't help but sense a resemblance between the tomb administrator's current aura and Hela's presence.
Under the ever-watchful gaze of the corpses in the stone pit and the heaps of bones lining the sides of the passage, Lumian pressed on through the musty air. He walked alongside Hela, passing landmarks like the chapel tomb and the memorial pillar tomb.
Hela broke the silence, her tone frosty. "Which level are we heading to?"

"The fourth level," Lumian replied, holding the white candle aloft and pointing to a nearby tomb sign, not withholding any information.
Hela nodded once more and picked up her pace, striding ahead of Lumian.
She seemed intimately familiar with the first level of the catacombs. After a few twists and turns, she led Lumian to a staircase that descended to the second level.
Compared to the previous level, there were far fewer tourists here. Occasionally, they encountered university students singing, dancing, or testing their courage under the "gaze" of the candlelit corpses.
Hela showed no signs of slowing down. Soon, Lumian spotted a weathered stone door.
With the candle's flickering yellow glow illuminating the way, he read the Intisian inscription on the stone door: "Entrance to the Old Ossuary."
"Down here, we enter the third level. Just beyond the door is the Sun and Steam altar. Keep walking until you reach the Krismona Night Pillar, and that's where we enter the fourth level," Hela explained, her voice still cold.
"Do you have a complete map of the catacombs?" Lumian couldn't help but inquire, aware that only the map of the first level was readily available on the market.
Hela shook her head.
"I know less the deeper we go. From the third level onward, you have to rely on the road signs and the guiding black line on the cave ceiling."
Lumian chose not to press the matter further. With Hela leading the way, they crossed the threshold of the Old Ossuary and descended a wide stone staircase, imbued with a palpable sense of history.
Upon reaching the third level of the tomb, they encountered a flickering candlelight and a makeshift altar composed of two weathered boulders.
The candle's flame belonged to a young man with black hair, brown eyes, and a pale complexion.
Upon spotting Lumian and Hela, he rushed toward them as if grasping at a lifeline.
As he ran, he shouted, "M-my friends vanished! Just like that!"

Chapter 349: Sacrificial Square

His friends had vanished? Lumian, clutching a white candle, watched as the young man dashed over, his eyebrows twitching slightly.

In the catacombs, it was common for people to disappear. What was unusual was that this guy still remembered his friends and their strange disappearance.

He wasn't a tomb administrator, nor did he have an angel sealed within him!

Any anomaly that occurred meant that something was wrong!

"Stop!" Lumian drew his revolver with his free right hand and pointed it at the black-haired, brown-eyed, and pale-faced young man.

In the flickering candlelight, the lad shook his head frantically and said, "Help! Save me! They've all vanished!"

He slowed down slightly but didn't stop.

Bang!

Lumian pulled the trigger of the revolver, sending the yellow bullet grazing the lad's body into the distance, disappearing into the darkness that couldn't be illuminated by candlelight.

Sensing Lumian's determination to stop him, the lad finally halted and revealed a pleading expression.

"Save me! Save me!"

Observing Hela's silence with no intention of making conversation, Lumian had no choice but to inquire, "What happened?"

As he spoke, he used the yellow candle flames in the trio's hands to survey the environment on the third level of the catacombs.

Unlike the first two levels of the tomb, which were surrounded by white bones and had corpses lining both sides of the path, this level had a small square devoid of corpses.

The square was paved with mottled cobblestones, with no moss or soil in the crevices. It was unbelievably clean.

Two grayish-white pillars made of boulders stood on either side of it. Their surfaces were severely weathered, leaving peeling marks.

Even so, Lumian, with his keen eyesight, discerned the Sun Sacred Emblem and Triangular Sacred Emblem engraved on the two pillars. Surrounding them were symbols like Sun Flowers, crankshafts, and connecting rods.

Around the square, where candlelight couldn't penetrate, the darkness was dense, as if countless figures stood there, casting gazes that made Lumian's skin prickle.

The young man with black hair, brown eyes, and a pale face replied fearfully,

"I don't know. We were just about to leave the square where the altars of the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery stand to explore the ancient tomb on the third level. Suddenly, they stumbled over something and fell, one by one. Even the candles in their hands fell to the ground and went out.
"I-I was at the back and saw them vanish just like that!"
"Vanish?" Lumian asked deliberately, probing for more information.
To him, the most pressing question wasn't how they vanished but why the witness still remembered their disappearance.
"Yes, they vanished!" The young man nodded fervently. "It was as if they evaporated right in front of me at an incredibly fast speed. I-I was so scared that I didn't dare look for them or return to the surface. I could only wait in this sacrificial square, praying to the Sun. Just as my candle was about to burn out, someone finally arrived!"
It's clear that if you aren't affected by the strangeness and manage to escape, your faith in the Eternal Blazing Sun would surge... Lumian couldn't discern anything amiss with the other party, so he casually posed another question.
"Are you college students?"
The lad nodded again.
"Yes, we're students from Trier Normal College. We formed a team to adventure here. My—my name is Gérard."
Lumian couldn't help but chuckle. He even considered inviting Gérard to join him and Hela in their search for the Samaritan Women's Spring. After all, the chances of a student like him surviving until graduation seemed slim. He might be more useful as bait.
As he contemplated how to determine if there was anything wrong with Gérard, Hela suddenly spoke with a cold tone, "We'll escort you back."
Surprisingly kind? Lumian turned to Hela, taken aback.
His impression of this lady was that even her blood ran cold.
Gérard was so grateful that tears and snot streamed down his face. He continued to thank them profusely as he approached.
Lumian observed his every move. He retrieved a white candle from his canvas bag and tossed it over.
Desperately, Gérard caught it and lit the new candle with the old one, which had only a small segment left.
Seeing the flickering candlelight, the college student breathed a sigh of relief and followed Hela and Lumian down the stone staircase leading to the second level.
Just as he took ten steps up, Gérard was suddenly stunned.

Lumian looked over and noticed that the lingering fear on his face had disappeared.
"Will it be a problem for you to return to the surface by yourself?" Hela asked again, but her words were entirely different from before.
Gérard chuckled.
"No problem. Thank you for the candle. Sigh, losing the spare candle is troublesome."
Uh... Lumian's heart stirred as he probed, "Did you venture to the third level of the tomb alone?"
Gérard nodded proudly. "Of course, I possess enough courage and experience."
He has finally forgotten about his schoolmates... Did he not forget because he was at the sacrificial square? Did Madame Hela notice that, thereby suggesting escorting him? Lumian nodded in enlightenment.
After watching Gérard ascend the stairs and leave through the entrance of the Old Ossuary, Lumian and Hela returned to the sacrificial square.
This time, when Lumian looked at the two sacrificial pillars representing the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery, his feelings for them were entirely different.
Perhaps they symbolized the protection of a deity!
However, even with the deity's gaze and protection, the two stone pillars inevitably showed signs of weathering and corrosion after countless years in the depths of the catacombs.
Lumian believed that more protection meant greater confidence. He wouldn't lose anything by giving it a try. Facing the sacrificial pillar engraved with the Sun Sacred Emblem, he raised his body slightly and spread his arms.
"Praise the Sun!"
Hela watched silently, not interrupting his prayer.
After Lumian finished his concise praise, the two of them made their way toward the Krismona Night Pillar to the north, following the black line above their heads and the road sign at the edge of the square.
Lumian, holding a white candle, had only taken a few steps away from the sacrificial square when his heart stirred. He cast his gaze forward.
At some point, a skeleton, covered in dark-green mold, had collapsed by the road. The bones of its hands lay across the road, as if it wanted to grab a passerby's ankle.
If Lumian had walked faster and failed to carefully observe the environment, he might have tripped over the corpse!

This instantly reminded him of Gérard's description: The college student's companions stumbled over something and fell to the ground, extinguishing their candles. Only then were they "swallowed" by the catacombs, leaving no trace of their existence!
Did they trip over these fallen bones? Lumian thoughtfully kicked the hand bone away.
Amidst the clanking sounds, he and Hela continued forward. However, after a few steps, they encountered another white skeleton with half its body lying on the road.
Lumian frowned and instinctively looked back at the spot where he had almost tripped.
The dim candlelight barely reached there, but Lumian could barely make out the details with his Hunter's eyesight.
His pupils dilated as he realized that the pale-white hand bone he had kicked had returned to its original position, still serving as an obstacle for passersby!
"They're still alive? Undead creatures?" Lumian asked, his nerves on edge.
"No, but it's a possibility," Hela replied succinctly.
Seeing Lumian's puzzled expression, she explained, "They must have been affected by the environment deep within the tomb and are exhibiting certain abnormalities. When the hidden dangers and horrors in the environment erupt, it's likely that they will all turn into undead creatures."
All of them turning into undead creatures... Lumian instinctively shuddered as he imagined such a scenario.
Whether complete or incomplete, there were at least a million skeletons on this level. It might even be an order of magnitude more. If they all became undead creatures with a hatred for the living, the situation would be terrifying to the extreme!
Seeing that Hela had no intention of turning back, Lumian followed. They relied on the guidance of the road sign and the black lines above their heads to navigate through the bones that were trying to obstruct them and slowly made their way toward their destination.
After an unknown amount of time, they finally reached the Krismona Night Pillar without encountering another living person.
It was a colossal pillar made of black marble, its upper end reaching the cave ceiling. There were no patterns or symbols engraved on its surface, nor were there any signs of weathering or corrosion.
Lumian was taken aback.
In the sacrificial square, the two stone pillars symbolizing the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery had been

weathered and corroded!
Is this pillar more special than the sacrificial ones?
As if sensing Lumian's thoughts, Hela spoke coldly, "Krismona is a member of the Demoness Sect, which can also be called the Demoness family.
"She was a Sequence 2 Demoness of Catastrophe. She perished in the War of the Four Emperors in the previous epoch, dying inside Fourth Epoch Trier. However, her characteristics were retrieved by the Demoness family.
"Apart from the Krismona Night Pillar, there are also the Marianne Night Pillar and Lius Night Pillar on the third or fourth level."
"Who are these two?" Lumian believed they were angels as well. Otherwise, they wouldn't be on par with Krismona.
"Marianne was the pope of the Church of Evernight back then, and Lius was a Blessed of ancient Death, a Death Consul. Their characteristics were also retrieved by their respective factions. As for whether other angels perished here, I'm not sure, but many of the angels who followed the Blood Emperor must have perished."
After Hela briefly explained, she pointed at the stone staircase behind the Krismona Night Pillar. "Let's go to the fourth level."
Lumian tersely agreed, and they quickly replaced their rapidly burning white candles before ascending to the fourth level.
...
After attending the mysticism gathering, Franca and Jenna retraced their steps to the underground area corresponding to the arcade of the opera house.
As they turned a corner at a fork of the road, Franca leaned over and whispered into Jenna's ear,
"Someone's following us."
Someone is following us? Jenna's heart skipped a beat.

Chapter 350: Negative Effects

"How can that be?" Jenna exclaimed, her surprise and confusion evident.

She recollected the mysticism gathering's conclusion, where participants dispersed through various routes at sporadic intervals. The two of them had been cautious, ensuring they left no clues. So, how had they been followed?

Observing Jenna's restraint from looking back, Franca calmly moved ahead and whispered,

"Who knows? Perhaps another participant chose this route and stumbled upon someone ahead. They might want to tail us, hoping for an opportunity to strike it big. Or maybe someone with unusual skills tracked us in an unexpected way.

"Let's keep moving forward as if nothing's amiss. We'll be safe once we reach the street under the arcade.

"If our pursuer strikes before then, drop the carbide lamp immediately and hide in the nearby shadows. Depending on the situation, you can decide how to join the fight."

Jenna nodded subtly, indicating her willingness to follow Franca's instructions.

Unintentionally, she tightened her grip on the carbide lamp.

After traversing the dark, damp tunnel for a hundred to two hundred meters, Franca slowed down and glanced back with confusion.

"The stalker has vanished...

"It's also possible that he found a way to bypass the spider silk I left behind..."

As she finished speaking, a figure emerged from the darkness ahead, illuminated by the carbide lamp's glow.

Jenna reacted swiftly, dropping the carbide lamp in her left hand and blending into the shadows.

Relying on her Mirror Substitution technique, Franca didn't rush to evade. Instead, she fixed her gaze on the stalker who had circled around to confront them.

It was the man masquerading as a Warlock, his face concealed beneath a hooded shadow.

The entrustee!

He gazed at Franca and deliberately spoke in a high-pitched voice, "I want to strike a deal with you guys."

...

Behind the Krismona Night Pillar, Lumian trailed behind Hela, clutching a new white candle that flickered in the dim light. They followed the worn stone steps, seemingly descending into the

depths of hell.
The stone walls on either side slowly gave way, revealing intricate reliefs of human heads. Dark gray figures clustered together, reminiscent of the countless bones piled high in the upper tomb.
As Lumian completed the descent and stepped onto the hushed fourth level of the catacombs, an overwhelming restlessness overcame him. It was as if he had been imprisoned for a long time, yearning for freedom.
This sensation wasn't unfamiliar; it was a side effect of the Armored Shadow contract, but it had never been this intense before!
It was as if his spirit felt trapped within his body, finally becoming cognizant of the truth.
It sought to break free from this "cage," to shatter this world and gain true freedom.
Phew... Lumian exhaled slowly, calming himself down.
Even without the Alms Monk boon, he believed he could manage these turbulent emotions. With the Alms Monk's power, he could control them even better.
According to Madam Justice, the higher one's Sequence, the more susceptible they are to madness and the hidden corruption of the fourth level of the catacombs. *Is that what I'm experiencing?* Is it because my Sequence isn't high that I could endure and control it?
Lumian quickly made a guess about the current situation. He instinctively looked up and cast his gaze diagonally at Hela.
Her neck is slender, mostly concealed in the widow-like attire's collar, a suitable target for snapping...
Just as this thought crossed Lumian's mind, he hurriedly shook his head, dismissing the negative effects of the Abscessed Hand's contract.
Simultaneously, he noticed that Hela's face had turned pale-whiter, resembling a corpse that had been dead for many days rather than a living human.
In an instant, Hela produced a military flask, unscrewed the cap, and downed its contents.
Lumian caught a whiff of the strong scent of alcohol.
Silently, he muttered, It should be liquor... Could Hela be like the alcoholics in Feysac, carrying multiple flasks with her?
After finishing a third of the bottle in a single gulp, Hela's complexion flushed slightly as she inquired, "Which way should we go?"
Lumian responded honestly, "It's in an ancient tomb on the westernmost side. We have a general idea of the area, but not the exact location."

Hela nodded and glanced at the top of the tomb, where a thick black line was drawn with arrows pointing in various directions.
Combining this with the signs near the entrance, Lumian could roughly discern the route leading west.
Nevertheless, he pulled out a compass he had prepared beforehand to confirm.
Under the feeble candlelight, the compass needle oscillated continuously, erratic and unceasing.
"It's acting crazy," Lumian commented, attempting to alleviate his pent-up irritation with humor.
"We'll have to rely on the road signs and black lines," Hela responded, seemingly expecting this.
Lumian sighed, eyeing the erratically moving compass. He chuckled self-deprecatingly.
"If it never stops, could it power a perpetual motion machine?"
Hela glanced at him.
"Aren't you a believer in the Eternal Blazing Sun?"
Lumian replied sincerely, "At least for now, I am."
Hela didn't press the topic further. Following the road sign beside her and the black lines above, she stepped to the right.
"The Marianne Night Pillar and Lius Night Pillar are both on this floor. There's also François's Tomb, the Blood Order Hall, and Crazy Shrooms Cave... Uh, the style of this name is completely different from the others," Lumian rambled, diverting his attention from the road sign.
The most noticeable difference between the fourth and third levels was the absence of corpses lining the path. It appeared wider and cleaner, yet it was eerie in its silence.
The ancient tombs had sealed entrances, concealing their contents from prying eyes.
Without turning around, Hela remarked, "Does your mental unrest manifest in talking and rambling more?"
"Not exactly. Talking just helps me cope with the irritation," Lumian admitted.
They continued to navigate, using the road signs and black lines to adjust their direction as they went along.
As Lumian passed by the partially natural tomb cave named the Order Hall, the outer soil tinged with a hint of blood, he suddenly spotted someone.
It was a woman in a plain white robe, her black hair flowing down her back, and her features extraordinarily exquisite, perfectly harmonious. Her aura was so pure that she seemed out of place in this silent and filthy tomb.
Despite having seen a Demoness of Pleasure frequently, Lumian

couldn't help but be amazed. He even felt an unholy urge to ravage her.
This wasn't just a drawback of Flog's boxing gloves; it was a dark impulse from the depths of his heart.
Lumian snapped out of it. The woman had sparkling blue eyes, cold and lifeless, and her hands were empty, holding an unlit white candle!
In the catacombs, the living would vanish without the protection of the white candle's flames!
Lumian's body tensed as the woman slipped into the surrounding darkness, blocked by the outer wall of the Blood Order Hall, and disappeared without a trace.
"What are you looking at?" Hela's cold voice cut through the silence.
"Didn't you see?" Lumian recounted the scene he had witnessed in detail.
Hela fell silent for a few seconds before saying, "I didn't see it indeed. However, as soon as you stopped moving, I cast my gaze in that direction."
"Was I the only one who could see it? Or was I the only one allowed to see it?" Lumian couldn't be certain if it was due to Termiboros's influence, his Sequence, or his gender.
Hela pondered for a moment and replied, "Don't concern yourself with such matters. It's normal for special wraiths and evil spirits to linger in the depths of the catacombs, but this place is like a powerful seal. As long as you don't break the rules and trigger an anomaly, you should be safe."
Lumian nodded.
"I was just thinking," Lumian began, "Ordinary tourists and adventurous college students wouldn't be able to pass through the third level of the tomb to reach this place. Why did they produce the guiding black line and accurate road signs? Who are they for?"
Hela answered as she took another step forward, "Official Beyonders who come here regularly to clean up and tomb administrators who patrol the area every day."
She then offered a simple reminder. "Based on your description, the female figure you saw earlier resembles a high-ranking Demoness."
Lumian's heart skipped a beat.
"Could it be the lingering vengeful spirit of the Demoness of Catastrophe, Krismona?"
"I'm not sure," Hela replied, taking another sip from her military flask.
Lumian casually glanced around, his eyelids twitching.

He noticed a purplish-red patch on the back of Hela's right hand.
It hadn't been there before.
It resembled the livor mortis seen on the deceased!
Is this the effect of the corruption on the fourth level of the catacombs? *Is Madame Hela using alcohol to resist it?* Lumian continued his small talk.
Amidst his babbling, they meandered through the unmarked ancient tombs and eventually reached the westernmost area of the floor.
At the edge of the rock wall, dozens or possibly hundreds of ancient tombs stretched out of sight.
Just as Lumian was about to ask Hela if she could expedite the search for their target, he heard knocking from an ancient tomb nearby.
Both Hela and Lumian tensed, their eyes fixed on the tomb as more of its damaged stone walls crumbled, revealing a dark cavern that humans could enter and exit.
A figure emerged, hunched over.
Lumian, filled with tension, wanted to unleash a Giant Fireball, but he restrained himself, opting to observe first.
The man who crawled out of the ancient tomb held a lit white candle, dusted off his clothes, and slowly straightened up.
Dressed in a black seer's robe commonly seen in circuses, he had brownish-black skin, a slender build, curly black hair, and deep-set eyes. A crystal-like monocle adorned his right eye. He was none other than the Islander swindler, Monette.
Monette flashed a smile at Lumian and Hela.
"What a coincidence!"

Chapter 351: Killing Intent

Dammit! Lumian couldn't help but curse inwardly when he saw Monette.

A mix of anger and fear washed over him, a reaction to the stress of the situation.

Why is it him again?

Why did he appear underground in front of me at such a critical moment?

What is he up to?

Why is he like the bedbugs at Auberge du Coq Doré, the cockroaches in the trash, and the rats in Underground Trier, ubiquitous and unavoidable?

"Who are you?" Hela asked coldly.

Her deadpan demeanor swiftly soothed Lumian's emotions. His mind raced as he analyzed the intentions of the Islander swindler, Monette, and the Salle de Bal Unique dance hall backing him.

Monette, with a sly smile, pinched the monocle in his right eye socket and replied,

"Like you guys, a tomb adventurer."

Tomb adventurer... You make grave robbers sound so honorable... Madam Justice once said that the higher a Sequence, the more dangerous it is to enter the catacombs... Therefore, the angel Monette believes in can't provide him with any assistance here. The saints with godhood in Salle de Bal Unique don't dare enter either... In other words, if Madame Hela and I join forces, we have a high chance of keeping Monette here forever, preventing him from roaming around like a cockroach! Lumian narrowed his eyes as he gazed at Monette.

The fear in his heart dissipated significantly, and the dangerous thoughts of using this opportunity to eliminate the swindler in front of him rapidly multiplied.

Lumian smiled and looked at Monette.

"Tomb adventurer? Do you know this place well?"

Monette smiled and said, "Of course."

He raised his right hand and pointed at an ancient tomb at the edge of the candlelight's range.

"That belongs to a member of the Fourth Epoch's Zoroast family."

Immediately after, Monette pointed to a few nearby tombs.

"That's a member of the Jacob family, a member of the Abraham family, a member of the Blood Legion...

"Unfortunately, there are no Beyonder characteristics left behind."

Lumian's surprise and puzzlement grew as he realized that the Islander swindler had genuinely answered his question. This

raised even more questions about Monette's motives.
He cautiously pointed towards the ancient tomb from which Monette had emerged.
"Whose tomb is that?"
Monette took a few steps forward, noticing the subtle shift in Lumian's demeanor. He stopped and maintained his enigmatic smile.
"A member of the Fourth Epoch's Amon family."
This swindler's knowledge of the Fourth Epoch families and the catacombs' fourth level is far more extensive than what should is written on the road signs.... Amid Lumian's bewilderment, Hela spoke again.
"Then do you know where the Samaritan Women's Spring is?"
Monette stroked the outer edge of his monocle and wore a smirk.
"Why should I tell you? What kind of reward can you offer?"
"Why should we believe you have the exact location of the Samaritan Women's Spring?" Lumian asked instinctively.
He suspected that Monette was about to embark on his habitual deception.
Monette chuckled lightly.
"I really don't know. The name Samaritan Women's Spring isn't that impressive. It seems to come from an ancient book I once read. However, after coming to this level many times, I discovered some strange phenomena. Some occasionally animated bones will automatically gather in this area, enter a tomb, and never come out."
The undead animated by the environment will be affected by this tomb's abnormality and drawn to it automatically? Or is that the Samaritan Women's Spring? Western side, some ancient tomb. The conditions match... Lumian's heart raced as he became even more vigilant.
Monette, the Islander swindler, voluntarily disclosed such crucial information without receiving any payment ?
This was completely out of character for him!
Any anomaly that occurred meant that something was wrong!
Lumian suspected two potential scenarios: either Monette was luring him and Hela into the ancient tomb where the undead gathered, hoping to lead them into a trap, or he was using them as scouts to navigate this dangerous territory.
Both possibilities were equally plausible. Although the former didn't benefit Monette, some people did enjoy seeing others suffer.
"That's all I know." Monette pinched the monocle in his right eye socket and said with a smile, "I'll search the other tombs. If you can find the so-called Samaritan Women's Spring, remember to

leave a note for me in the tomb of the Amon family member; tell me what's so special about it."
As he spoke, he advanced toward Lumian.
In Lumian's tense state, poised to strike at a moment's notice, the Islander swindler sidestepped him and headed for the distant tomb, carrying a lit white candle.
Soon, his silhouette disappeared at the crossroads, plunging the area into darkness once more.
Has he truly left? Lumian remained vigilant, his attention focused on Termiboros's reaction.
The Inevitability angel remained silent, seemingly unperturbed by Monette's reappearance.
Hela took a few steps back and positioned herself beside an ancient tomb, pushing open its rickety stone door.
Confronted by the pale-white bones strewn at the tomb's entrance, Hela raised her right hand.
As if pulled by invisible threads, the bones swiftly converged, morphing into a swaying humanoid skeleton with a creaking sound.
Hela refrained from issuing any commands to the undead creature she had summoned. She observed coldly as it slowly departed from the tomb, drawn by an unseen force into the darkness.
Is Madame Hela from the Corpse Collector pathway, or does she possess a corresponding mystical item? Lumian roughly discerned Hela's intentions. She intended on utilizing the undead creatures' characteristic—the automatic attraction to the problematic ancient tomb—to chart their course.
The most probable anomaly in this region was the Samaritan Women's Spring!
Holding their burning white candles, the pair followed the humanoid skeleton through the westernmost tombs.
Suddenly, another figure emerged from the darkness around the corner, a candle flame accompanying him.
A crystal monocle adorned his right eye socket, and an enigmatic smile graced his face.
It was that Islander swindler Monette once more!
As Lumian jumped in fright, Monette asked with a smile, "Is that Samaritan Women's Spring interesting? Can I accompany you?"
Why didn't you ask previously? Lumian's killing intent surged.
Without batting an eyelid, he said, "We haven't even located it yet. How would we know if it's interesting? Why didn't you conceal yourself in the shadows, awaiting the completion of our exploration and confirmation of any dangers or traps before venturing forth? That way, the risk would be considerably lower.

And even if we succeed, we won't be able to remove the Samaritan Women's Spring in its entirety."
Monette pressed the back of his right index finger against the monocle and nodded in agreement.
"You make a valid point."
The swindler grinned and retreated into the darkness around the corner.
The candle's flame promptly dwindled until it vanished.
He left so easily? Lumian's thoughts raced, but he couldn't quite decipher Monette's intentions.
He glanced at Hela and noticed that she was sipping liquor again, but her complexion had a pallid, almost bluish hue.
She resembled a corpse even more now.
"Do you have any idea what's up with these monocle-wearing folks?" Lumian inquired.
Hela placed the empty military flask back into her hidden pocket. As she continued to follow the humanoid skeleton, she replied in a cold, ethereal voice, "It's tied to the Fourth Epoch's Amon family."
Fourth Epoch's Amon family... The ancient tomb Monette emerged from belonged to a member of the Amon family... They control the Marauder pathway, much like Franca mentioned the Demoness family's control over the Assassin pathway. Seeing that Hela wasn't inclined to share more, Lumian had no choice but to keep silent and follow.
Monette's reappearance pushed aside any thoughts of idle chatter to ease his restlessness.
As they proceeded, the candles held by Lumian and Hela took on a faint, eerie shade of dark green.
The "resurrected" skeleton turned into a massive, decaying tomb with a partially open stone door.
Lumian's spirits soared, sensing that the Samaritan Women's Spring lay ahead.
At that moment, another figure poked its head out from the side of the tomb.
Under the yellowish candlelight, the crystal monocle gleamed with an unsettling brilliance.
It was the Islander swindler, Monette, once more!
He grinned and inquired, "Do you have any messages for your family and friends? I can help convey them."
Lumian was so startled that he almost couldn't contain the urge to strike down Monette right then and there!
There couldn't be a better place to deal with him!
"No," Hela replied icily, choosing not to engage.
Lumian exhaled slowly and said, "Neither do I."

"What a shame." Monette returned to the dark tunnel beside the tomb, looking disappointed.
The yellowish candlelight flickered slightly, indicating that he hadn't gone far and was waiting nearby.
Lumian couldn't help but glance at Hela and gesture with his right hand as if cutting a throat.
He was asking if they should eliminate the Islander swindler in advance.
Hela remained silent for a few moments before gently shaking her head.
"We'll leave as soon as we obtain the Samaritan Women's Spring."
She intended to stay focused on their objective and avoid stirring up further trouble.
Yes, once I've collected the spring water, I'll teleport away with Madam Hela... Lumian agreed and replaced their candles with fresh ones.
After some time, the skeleton still hadn't emerged. Cautiously, they entered the massive tomb through the partially open stone door.
At that moment, a raspy, elderly voice echoed from the depths of the tomb.
"Halt!"
Within the perimeter of the yellowish candlelight, a figure trembled into view.

Chapter 352: Spring Source

A figure staggered out from the depths of the tomb.

As the figure entered the range of the candle flames, it seemed uncomfortable with the light. It raised its right hand to shield itself from the glare.

Similar to the tomb administrators, the figure wore a blue shirt and yellow pants. However, his face bore deep wrinkles and light-brown patches. Sparse, dry, white hair adorned his head, and his eyes were an unusual pure black, giving off an icy coldness.

For some inexplicable reason, Lumian found it challenging to discern the features of the aged tomb administrator. His form seemed to blur at the edges, blending seamlessly with the surrounding darkness, impervious to the white candle's glow. His breath was so faint it bordered on non-existent.

In a hoarse, emotionless voice, like that of a corpse capable of speech, he uttered, "Get out of here!"

"Since it's open for viewing, there shouldn't be any restricted areas!" Lumian retorted, echoing the tone of college students in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, attempting to reason with him.

But the aged tomb administrator repeated, "Get out of here!"

Lumian turned to Hela, hoping she might succeed in persuading the gravekeeper.

If that failed, he was prepared to take more direct action, either restraining the other party or even rendering him unconscious.

The Spell of Harrumph was perfectly suited for such tasks.

However, Hela shook her head slowly and began to exit the tomb.

...

Deep underground near the arcade of the opera house, Franca gazed at the entrustee and inquired, "What kind of deal?"

The Warlock-dressed man responded in a shrill tone, "I'll increase the reward to 50,000 verl d'or. Go to the Deep Valley Quarry and create a huge commotion, exposing the secret cave.

"If you're willing, you can sign the contract now. I have a way to ensure the contract's binding powers on both parties."

Fifty thousand verl d'or to create an explosion capable of shattering the stone wall at the secret cave's entrance? Why seek us out for such a straightforward task while offering a generous compensation of 50,000 verl d'or? Franca's suspicion deepened.

With a subtle movement, Franca produced a fist-sized grayish-white cloth bag and tossed it into the shadows beside her. She assumed a guarded posture against the man across from her and as though it was inconvenient for her to find a necessary item.

"Help me find my seal."
Seal? Jenna materialized from the shadows and caught the small coin bag, hearing the metallic clinks within.
She was baffled by Franca's request.
Isn't the bag supposed to be filled with coins and the Ring of Punishment?
Franca smiled at the entrustee.
"What are the specific terms of the contract?"
She sensed the possibility that the other party might manipulate the contract using Beyonder powers from the corresponding domain. Franca had a plan to attack before committing to any contract—capture him, clarify the terms, and then consider whether to sign it!
...
Baffled, Lumian followed Hela out of the tomb and asked, "What do we do now?"
"Grab my right arm," Hela's voice was colder than before, devoid of warmth.
Lumian roughly grasped her thoughts and quickly complied, reaching out to firmly grasp her right arm.
Almost instantly, Hela twirled the black diamond ring on her right middle finger with her left palm.
Almost simultaneously, Lumian felt a profound shift. He was no longer in the same world as the tomb entrance.
Surveying his surroundings, he noticed that everything, including the dim candlelight, had become hazy, shrouded in dense fog.
Guided by Hela, Lumian moved cautiously through the thick fog, taking one step at a time.
There was no movement in the depths of the tomb, and the two of them slowly advanced in silence.
Before long, within the limited visibility of five meters, he spotted a rotting coffin standing upright on the ground.
The aged tomb administrator lay motionless in the coffin, his eyes wide open and devoid of life.
Lumian couldn't detect any sign of breathing this time.
In this foggy state, the aged tomb administrator seemed to pay them no mind, allowing Lumian and Hela to pass by as they headed towards the end of the tomb.
There, they found a gentle downward slope leading to an unknown destination.
Hela gestured for Lumian to release his grip, and the enigmatic concealment dissipated.
Standing at the top of the slope, Lumian held a candle flame in his hand, illuminating a path lined with scattered, broken bones.

An unsettling chill emanated from the depths of his heart, stifling his emotions and desires. Yet, an unshakable anger and malice of wanting to snap someone's neck persisted, growing stronger. Lumian felt as though he was observing his own duality—a sane self contrasted with a crazed, unfamiliar self.

He couldn't help but glance at Hela, who downed a flask of liquor in one go. Her face remained pale, and purplish-red patches marred her skin, making her look as if she had been dead for some time.

"Are you alright?" Lumian remembered his primary role as a constant reminder to Hela to prevent her from being corrupted by the catacombs and undergoing any abnormalities.

Hela put away the empty flask and replied in a lifeless voice, "I'm fine for now. I've made preparations to deal with this situation. As long as I don't linger too long, I should be alright."

Lumian pressed, "How long can you stay?"

"About half an hour," Hela replied, beginning to descend the slope.

Lumian planned to grab Hela's arm and use spirit world traversal to force her out of here a few minutes in advance, regardless of what they found later.

Descending deeper, the slope became littered with more bones, gradually taking on complete and original forms. Some resembled humans, while others appeared monstrous.

The skeleton Hela had awakened earlier knelt on one knee on this slope, unable to proceed further.

As they continued, Lumian noticed a thin grayish-white fog up ahead, contracting and expanding, as if it had a life of its own.

Hela slowed her pace and regarded the fog with heightened caution.

"Is there a problem?" Lumian asked, finding the fog oddly familiar.

Hela nodded and said, "It's very dangerous. I've prepared as best as I can, but I'm not certain it will work."

As Lumian listened to Madame Hela's response, he continued to observe the grayish-white fog.

Suddenly, he recognized it.

Isn't this the same fog that shrouded Cordu's ruins?

The very fog that provided protection when I prayed for boons?

In that moment, Lumian realized the true reason behind Madam Justice's insistence that he accompany Madame Hela in the search for the Samaritan Women's Spring.

He cautiously extended his right palm towards the grayish-white fog, and as they touched, he felt warmth in his left chest.

He knew that Mr. Fool's seal had been activated.

He pushed forward, his right palm passing through the grayish-

white fog without encountering any danger or abnormality.
With newfound confidence, he couldn't help but think, Praise The Fool!
After a brief prayer, Lumian turned to Hela with a confident smile.
"I've also made the necessary preparations, and they seem effective.
"I'll grab your arm."
Hela didn't inquire further about Lumian's preparations or the information he possessed. She allowed him to grab her left arm, and together, they ventured into the grayish-white fog.
The surroundings grew even quieter, and an unusual, almost palpable aura seemed to fill the air. Before long, they heard an ethereal and faint splashing sound.
The sound of water... Lumian felt a surge of excitement and relief.
They were in the right place, and the Samaritan Women's Spring was likely nearby!
They continued to move forward, and as they did, the grayish-white fog rapidly dissipated, revealing a pond-sized spring.
Around the spring, a dark substance of an indescribable color encircled the pale-white water at its center.
In the water, wet, black seaweed-like hair floated, and a few vague figures struggled to crawl out from the depths.
A woman stood beside the spring. It was the white-robed figure Lumian had seen before, suspected to be a high-ranking Demoness.
Her face was pale-white and translucent, her eyes blank and cold. White bones were scattered around her.
Splash!
Suddenly, the pale-white spring water receded with a splash, leaving behind a pitch-black hole that seemed to defy the presence of light.
With another splash, the spring water surged from the dark hole, filling the pond-sized spring once more.
This time, it was dimmer, less pale-white, and appeared empty and dark, containing countless indescribable colors.
In an instant, the spring water blended with the surrounding grayish-white fog, restoring its original appearance when Lumian and Hela first laid eyes on it.
In this place, their memories began to blur as if they were slowly fading away.
In a hurry, Lumian reached into his pocket, intending to retrieve the metal canister he had prepared to collect the pale-white spring water.
But he touched something stone-like.

He had never put anything similar into his pocket!
Lumian retracted his right hand in surprise and saw a brown stone in his palm. The stone was riddled with potholes, each filled with dark-red speckled spots.
Earth Blood ore!
It was the Earth Blood ore he had previously lost.
When did it return? Why did it suddenly appear in my possession?
This is a part of Underground Trier! As Lumian's pupils dilated in alarm, a frenzied, terrifying aura saturated with blood and rust emanated from the dark hole that had swallowed the pale-white spring water once more.
The mere presence of this aura froze Lumian and Hela simultaneously, rendering them immobile.
Beside the suspected high-ranking Demoness, a skeleton raised its palm and touched its right eye.
Simultaneously, it bared its white teeth and emitted a chilling, delighted laugh.
"You've already obtained it. How can you not give it a try?"
Around the spring, other white skeletons joined in, their mouths opening to produce the same voice: "You've already obtained it. How can you not give it a try?"

Chapter 353: Crazy Figure

"You've already obtained it. How can you not give it a try?" The ghastly white skeletons stared at Lumian, their terrifying aura intimidating him. They laughed mockingly, their laughter exaggerated and crazed.

Splash!

The dark spring water, not pale-white enough, gushed from the dark hole and filled the small "pond."

Compared to before, there was an additional figure in the water.

The figure seemed to be engulfed in an intense inferno, almost colorless flames covering its entire body.

Despite occupying only a corner of the spring, Lumian, frozen in fear, felt it was abnormally huge, like a mountain peak.

Within the nearly intangible flames, the figure revealed long, blood-colored hair. Its sculpted face was marred by decay and pus, and its bones gleamed with a metallic luster. Its iron-black eyes seemed rusted, emitting a sinister blood-red glow.

Yellowish "magma" dripped from the figure's body, quickly extinguished by the pale-white spring water.

As the Samaritan Women's Spring surged again, the dense white bones that had made the sound fell silent, as if they were about to decay into mud.

Seeing the decomposing mountain-like figure, the stench of blood and rust intensified in Lumian's nostrils. His stunned mind was tinged with a madness that yearned to destroy everything, igniting his already violent and ferocious aura.

If he hadn't been on the brink of death, his thoughts completely stalled, he might have lost his mind and become a lunatic.

He could lose control at any moment if that happened.

In any case, he stood frozen in place, as if facing his most feared natural enemy. All he knew was to tremble, forget to resist, and forget to escape.

Splash!

The highly decayed figure, shrouded in intangible flames, entered the pitch-black cave, determined to reach the edge of the Samaritan Women's Spring. It reached out its right palm, dripping with a faint yellowish-red liquid, trying to grab Lumian, who stood there.

The spring water surged, and a faint fog gathered, preventing the figure, which appeared as massive as a mountain, from leaving the spring.

A low growl escaped the figure, and its iron-black eyes emitted a corrupting redness, capable of unsettling anyone who lay their

eyes on them.
Under this influence, Lumian's mind buzzed, and he went blank. The Samaritan Women's Spring trembled violently.
Although the terrifying figure couldn't break free from the spring's constraints, it successfully blocked the spring water's retreat into the dark hole.
Simultaneously, the decayed and shadowy figures within the spring surged toward the shore, driven by the low growl.
Among them, there was a woman filled with pus exuding a serene night-like temperament, a decaying corpse adorned with a golden crown, an iron-colored skeleton sprouting greasy feathers, a figure entwined with countless shattered maggots, and a strange black entity...
These figures, too, couldn't leave the Samaritan Women's Spring but approached the edge, extending pale-white, pus-covered or highly decayed palms made of repulsive maggots toward Lumian's feet.
The long black hair floating on the water's surface, resembling a tangle of weeds, suddenly came to life and extended rapidly beyond the spring.
The white-robed woman lingering around the Samaritan Women's Spring was instantly ensnared by the long black hair. Lumian's figure reflected in her stiff, cold blue eyes.
Bizarre and terrifying palms gripped Lumian, and the long black hair tugged at him. Slowly and uncontrollably, he slid toward the Samaritan Women's Spring, drawing closer to the colossal figure formed by madness and flames.
His body grew colder, and his thoughts went blank.
At that moment, all light suddenly vanished, and he was consumed by a most profound darkness.
Melodious singing and chanting echoed from afar, soothing the area. The blurry and shadowy figures no longer displayed the same level of madness as before, as if they had been pacified.
The terrifying palms that had clutched Lumian's feet and nearly froze his spirit and flesh retracted. The long black hair that had tugged at his body lost its vitality and fell to the ground, powerless.
The figure suspected to be a high-ranking Demoness lingering around the Samaritan Women's Spring also came to a halt, as if listening to a nocturnal symphony.
Even the most terrifying and frenzied figure slowed down, its terrifying aura significantly weakening.
Lumian snapped out of his daze and instantly comprehended what had transpired.
The thief who had stolen the Earth Blood ore was none other than

Monette of Salle de Bal Unique!
Monette had deliberately orchestrated a coincidental encounter with him on the fourth level of the catacombs. Using his thieving skills, he had surreptitiously returned the Earth Blood ore, enabling Lumian to bring the ore specimen to the Samaritan Women's Spring without detection, triggering this bizarre turn of events!
Lumian had never intended to take the Earth Blood ore underground, deeming it too dangerous given his current abilities. Monette's theft and return of the ore had been a passive way to provoke an encounter, the nature of which remained uncertain!
As for Monette's motives, Lumian knew he might only uncover them after this ordeal concluded.
With his thoughts racing, Lumian instinctively reached for Hela's arm, intending to activate his contract mark and escape using spirit world traversal.
In the process, he attempted to rid himself of the Earth Blood ore, hoping to distract the crazed figure with long, blood-colored hair.
However, the Earth Blood ore appeared to be affected by the abnormal environment, showing visible signs of deterioration.
Silently, it crumbled, dissolving into the air. The hidden blood stains marked Lumian's palm, corroding his skin.
Meanwhile, the flame of the white candle Hela held flickered precariously, on the brink of extinguishing. The black diamond ring on her right hand emitted a profound darkness.
After grasping her arm, Lumian realized they were both frozen in place.
This area seemed to be cut off from the spirit world, rendering escape impossible!
I can't escape... Lumian retracted his hand decisively and addressed the fiery figure, who gazed at him with madness: "Ha!"
A pale-yellow beam emanated from his mouth, striking the dark, mountain-like figure.
The figure swayed, but remained unharmed. It unleashed an intangible roar once more.
Receiving this new "command," the bizarre figures, previously calmed by the tranquil night, trembled. They extended their decaying or repulsive hands once again, clutching at Lumian's feet.
The black hair, previously lying dormant, rose again.
Realizing evasion was futile, Lumian's body erupted in fiery flames.
The crimson blossoms of destruction rapidly dimmed and faded, as if their vitality had been extinguished in an instant.
The pale-white, pus-filled hand was the first to seize Lumian's

right foot, "silencing" him as his thoughts rapidly waned.
The highly decayed hand, the iron-colored skeleton adorned with light-yellow feathers, and the form intertwined with shattered maggots fulfilled their tasks one after another. They dragged Lumian, who appeared as if in a trance with wide-open eyes, toward the Samaritan Women's Spring.
Hela found herself encircled by layers of long black hair. It pierced through the tranquility of the night, enveloping the lady, who displayed signs of decay.
Lumian stared vacantly at the rigid, decomposing countenance, at the iron-black eyes tinged with blood. He sensed an overwhelming, unadulterated madness but could summon no coherent thought.
His body grew more rigid, and purplish-red livor mortis emerged on his flesh.
He was now just a step away from the pale-white spring.
At that moment, the Samaritan Women's Spring, which had been held at bay by the colossal figure for an extended period, finally surged forward, breaking through the barrier. It swept all the figures, including the colossal one engulfed in invisible flames, back into the lightless abyss of the dark hole.
The colossal figure emitted a furious roar, but it was helpless against the relentless flow of pale-white spring water, vanishing into the depths of the abyss.
Lumian "woke up" and spotted the white-robed woman lingering nearby. He swiftly turned and sprinted toward the crest of the slope.
His plan was straightforward:
Since the abnormality stemmed from the Earth Blood ore, which had partially melded with his palm, he needed to seize this chance to escape. It was not the time to collect the remaining spring water.
As long as he could make his getaway before the pale-white spring surged again and the menacing figures resurfaced, Hela would be safer left behind. She could gather the water calmly and share it with him later.
To escape, given that teleportation had failed, his legs were his sole option now.
As Lumian ran, he readied himself for any potential setbacks.
Harnessing his Pyromaniac abilities, he steadied the flame of the white candle and retrieved the Flog boxing gloves from his bag, fitting them onto his hands.
Concurrently, he attempted to invoke The Fool's honorific name in Hermes.
"The Fool that doesn't belong to this era..."

This inspiration was triggered by the grayish-white fog enveloping the Samaritan Women's Spring!
Splash!
Midway through his invocation and while covering some ground, Lumian heard the sound of the spring water surging.
It was faster than he had anticipated!
The growl, steeped in the scent of blood and rust, reverberated through the surroundings.
Unaware of Lumian's thought process, Hela's body shuddered once more, as if she had transformed from an emotionless corpse into a frightened living being.
Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the colossal, invisible-flame-shrouded figure with blood-colored hair and tattered, bloodstained armor.
Lumian, too, was taken aback. He even felt an inclination to surrender and give up his resistance.
He strained to endure, unable to continue invoking the honorific name. His only recourse was to place his faith in the Flog boxing gloves.
If he could hold out just a little longer, the hidden evil gods might direct Their attention toward him because of the material of the boxing gloves, sending forth dangerous creatures to influence or assail him.
In the past, Lumian would have prayed for the impending abnormality to remain manageable. But now, he hoped that the more dangerous it became, the better!
Only by muddying the waters would a fish have a chance to escape!

Chapter 354: Palm

Underground near the arcade of the opera house.

The Warlock-dressed man spoke to Franca in a shrill voice, "It's simple. There are only three specific terms. First, you two must promise to blow up the hidden door of the secret cave in Deep Valley Quarry, creating a commotion that can attract everyone nearby. Second, I'll pay both of you 50,000 verl d'or with an advance of 20,000. Third, you'll face consequences if you don't uphold your end of the bargain. This restriction applies to both parties. We can discuss the details."

The man had no intention of deceiving the two Beyonders in the contract. Instead, he planned to use his abilities to modify the mission's content the moment the contract was established, forcing them to infiltrate the secret cave in Deep Valley Quarry and retrieve what he wanted, along with sufficient evidence.

This entrustee had once purchased a human soul for 1,000 verl d'or using this unique ability to tamper with transaction terms. He believed he wouldn't be disappointed this time.

As Franca conversed with the Warlock-dressed man, Jenna, hidden in the shadows, reached into the small money bag and idly stroked the gold, silver, and copper coins inside.

She was certain that there was no seal inside the money bag.

Or rather, Franca didn't have a seal!

What does she mean? Jenna's gaze shifted to the entrustee who had stated the terms of the contract, finding it rather peculiar.

If he wanted to strike a deal, why not apply for notarization at the mysticism gathering just now?

If he were afraid that the contents of the commission would be exposed, he could have gone to the "conversation room" and borrowed the host's mystical item. There was no need to secretly follow us for the commission!

Something is definitely off!

Jenna understood why Franca had tossed the coin bag to her.

As soon as she realized that something was amiss, she was to immediately use the Ring of Punishment to attack the other party and take control over the situation!

Phew... Jenna exhaled slowly and put on the Ring of Punishment. Using the shadows, she closed the distance between herself and the entrustee.

Franca glanced at the shadows not illuminated by the carbide lamp and smiled at the entrustee dressed as a Warlock.

"That sounds reasonable, but I need to confirm if you're lying and if there's a problem with this matter."

As she spoke, she gently tossed the carbide lamp in front of her and retrieved a mirror from the Assassin suit's hidden pocket. She smiled and said, "Coincidentally, I'm skilled in divination."
Upon hearing this, the entrustee dressed as a Warlock's pupils dilated, and his entire body tensed up.
He wasn't sure if Magic Mirror Divination could expose his scheme!
Hidden in the shadows, Jenna detected his abnormality. Without hesitation, she raised her right hand slightly, causing the iron-colored ring covered in tiny spikes to glow.
Simultaneously, two blinding bolts of lightning shot out from her eyes.
Psychic Piercing!
...
At the Samaritan Women's Spring.
Lumian and Hela were once again gripped by a horrifying terror, consumed by pure madness. They stood frozen in place, their bodies quivering slightly.
While this madness immobilized them, it paradoxically spared them from imminent death. Their frozen bodies burned with an intense heat, and their dormant thoughts ignited with fury and brutality.
However, their purplish-red livor mortis and decaying skin continued to worsen, showing no signs of improvement.
Darkness descended once more, and Hela used the black diamond ring on her right hand to try and pacify the spectral figures hovering in the Samaritan Women's Spring, including the burning giant in rotting armor.
Lumian recollected his thoughts and realized that his escape with Hela had not been in vain.
They had distanced themselves more than ten meters from the spring, and the decaying, shadowy figures could not leave the Samaritan Women's Spring or reach the shore to grasp their legs and drag them underwater.
These figures clustered at the spring's edge, their vacant eyes staring into nothingness. Their heavily decayed or distorted hands occasionally reached out from the water, only to be forcefully pulled back by some mysterious force.
Silently, they emitted roars that made the entire slope tremble, inducing drowsiness and feelings of submission in Lumian and Hela, causing various adverse reactions.
However, the madness that had ignited their thoughts and the strange effects that had led to signs of dissociative identity disorder had failed to take hold.

Around the Samaritan Women's Spring, only the lingering female figure and the long black hair, resembling seaweed, could approach Lumian. One gazed at him with eerie eyes, while the other extended itself, attempting to ensnare him.
Lumian was relieved. Even if his resistance failed, he would be dragged toward the Samaritan Women's Spring by the long black hair and the indistinct figure suspected to be a high-ranking Demoness. With more than ten meters to cover, he had a chance to hold on until the pale-white spring water overcame the terrifying figure with its reddening iron-black eyes and carried him back into the pitch-black abyss.
When the moment arrived, Lumian could make a swift escape. In two or three attempts, he could exit the area shrouded in the grayish-white fog and return to the chamber above.
Later, he would send Hela inside to retrieve the Samaritan Women's Spring's water, avoiding the adverse reaction caused by the blood ore and the colossal figure which was clearly more potent than the other "water ghosts."
But in the next moment, Lumian's body froze unnaturally.
White frost appeared and vanished repeatedly on his body.
In the blue eyes of the woman, Lumian was now imprisoned in ice.
The long black hair coiled tighter around him, dragging him toward the Samaritan Women's Spring.
Seeing Lumian in peril, Hela, who had remained relatively unaffected, swiftly aimed her right hand at the unknown entity, suspected to be the lingering spirit of a high-ranking Demoness, using the black diamond ring that emitted a constant darkness.
The night transformed into a shroud, enshrouding the other entity and inducing slumber.
Lumian seized this opportunity to release a harrumph, channeling a white stream of light through his nose and into the crystalline ice that bound him, targeting the seaweed-like black hair.
The black hair that ensnared him suddenly lost its strength.
Simultaneously, the curtain of night that had surrounded the entity abruptly constricted, leaving it empty.
Not far away, the female figure in the white robe reappeared, her gaze fixed on Lumian.
Though danger still loomed, Lumian felt a surge of relief. He believed that, even if he stopped resisting now, he could hold on until the pale-white spring withdrew into its depths.
At that moment, the iron-colored eyes of the colossal figure floating in the spring grew wilder, and the rust-like redness became as vivid as blood.

He tugged violently at the spring water, as if trying to break free from invisible chains.
Finally, amid a tumultuous earthquake-like upheaval, the figure draped in tattered, blood-soaked armor and engulfed in invisible flames reached the edge of the Samaritan Women's Spring.
Rumble!
The ground quaked, sending grayish-white dust raining down.
Lumian's mind buzzed, and he blacked out instantly.
When he regained his senses, he found himself back at the edge of the Samaritan Women's Spring, having covered over ten meters in an instant.
From the corner of his eye, he saw Hela rushing back towards him, her eyes vacant and bloodshot, resembling a puppet or a mindless soldier following orders.
Lumian could already guess that when he closed his eyes, he had returned to the spring's edge in a similarly empty and obedient state.
At this moment, he couldn't flee upon regaining consciousness. Behind him were the coiling black hair and the figure of the supposed high-ranking Demoness. In front of him were the grotesque, decaying, and repulsive palms.
Simultaneously, they clawed at Lumian, intent on dragging him into the spring. The colossal figure with long, blood-red hair hanging over it was just a step away.
Gritting his teeth, Lumian seized the chance to bite the base of the white candle and reached into his pocket with his gloved left hand. As he did, he cursed internally.
You dogsh*t evil gods have been observing me for so long. *Why haven't you sent anything to harm me?*
Where are the promised dangerous creatures?
Are you afraid to confront that insane figure here?
Despite his curses, Lumian didn't give up. He drew a dagger and was about to cleave off his right palm, which had been corroded by the Earth Blood ore.
If you want it, take it!
As for whether the 6 a.m. reboot each morning would cause his missing right hand to regenerate, he didn't care at this point.
At that moment, a pale-white hand emerged from the pitch-black hole at the depths of the spring, where the ground trembled and quaked.
The fingers of the hand were slender, with cracks running along its back. These cracks oozed pale-yellow feathers and decaying yellow pus. The skin on either side of the cracks was crystalline like jade, but pale and dark.

As the palm emerged, it crossed the barrier of the spring water and seized the right leg of the colossal figure.
The figure, clad in tattered, blood-stained armor and shrouded in intangible flames, swayed uncontrollably as it was pulled toward the pitch-black abyss deep within the pale-white spring water.
It struggled and resisted with all its might, but the bizarre palm's retreat remained relentless. The only response was the falling of light-yellow feathers, pus stained with blood, and skin that was no longer crystalline but highlighted with black, living blood vessels.
Countless complex symbols—pale-white, pitch-black, or dim—appeared, carrying the frenzied and terrifying figure as it rapidly shrank toward the pitch-black spring.
Lumian couldn't witness the scene, nor could he see what was happening. All he knew was that the massive figure with a decaying face, blood-red hair, and iron-black eyes was moving away from him. The terrifying hands that had grabbed him stopped moving, frozen in place.
The crazed figure growled repeatedly but couldn't break free. In the blink of an eye, most of its body had been dragged back into the depths of the spring.
Just as it was about to disappear completely, its madness materialized. Two dark-red "rust spots" shot out of its iron-black eyes and darted straight toward Lumian.
Instinctively, Lumian raised his right hand to block. The two rust marks pierced through the Flog boxing glove and into his skin, which had been corroded by the Earth Blood ore.
Splash!
The pale-white spring water receded entirely, pulling all the floating figures into the pitch-black abyss.
The vicinity of the spring fell eerily silent.

Chapter 355: The Real Spring Water

In the midst of the eerie silence, Lumian sensed an unusual heat in his right palm, as though it were ablaze.

Swiftly, he stripped off his boxing gloves and inspected his palm. The Earth Blood ore's corrosive touch had left it bright red, radiating waves of excruciating pain that left him seething with frustration and anger.

Aside from this, nothing appeared out of the ordinary for now.

Given the circumstances, Lumian couldn't afford a detailed examination. Ignoring the cold creeping through his body and his "calmed" thoughts, he retreated to assess the situation at the Samaritan Women's Spring.

Indistinct figures and the long, weed-like black hair submerged in the water were drawn into a lightless abyss, swaying relentlessly, as though a fierce battle raged within.

The white-robed, corpse-like figure that had lingered nearby had vanished into thin air, leading Lumian to suspect that his encounter with the suspected high-level Demoness on the fourth floor was linked to a similar change in the Samaritan Women's Spring.

This sight sparked a daring idea in Lumian's mind.

Seeing the terrifying figure pulled back to the fountain by a strange power, one in fierce resistance and the other trying to suppress it, it seemed unlikely a victor would emerge quickly. Lumian decided to stay vigilant, pause his escape, and explore the possibility of setting a trap while collecting some of the pale-white spring water once it surged again.

The "water ghosts" were nowhere to be seen at the spring's bottom, nor were there any blurry figures lingering nearby. It appeared to be a safe moment.

In the next instant, Lumian noticed Hela producing a golden bottle adorned with intricate, mystical symbols, reminiscent of the symbols he had seen at the basement door of the Highland Mystic Potion shop.

Hela didn't wait for the pale-white spring water to rise again. She squatted down and pressed the bottle's opening to the damp soil at the spring's edge.

The soil was dark-colored, and the closer they got to the pitch-black hole, the more it seemed to contain countless colors. The soil was more ordinary the farther it was from it. It was no different from the slope itself in areas where hadn't been submerged by the spring water.

The soil, dark and filled with countless colors near the pitch-black

hole, dried up as the pale-white spring water receded into the abyss. However, the periphery remained slightly moist, producing droplets that were more tangible than the pale-white spring water and resembled the color of a nocturnal lake.
Seeing that Hela's target was the liquid, Lumian asked in confusion, "Aren't you going to wait for the Samaritan Women's Spring to resurface?"
Hela shook her head.
"This is the true Samaritan Women's Spring Water. The pale-white water is too dangerous to touch right now. Contact with it means instant death, wandering forever near the spring or its source. Our containers are no exception."
That terrifying? Could it be that the Samaritan Women's Spring is a byproduct of the pale-white water and not its true form? Lumian took out a metal canister he had prepared in advance and held it to the droplets seeping from the soil at the spring's edge.
With just one drop, the canister showed signs of rust and decay from prolonged submersion.
Without a word, Hela produced a golden canister engraved with intricate symbols and tossed it to Lumian.
Only then did Lumian manage to collect the Samaritan Women's Spring. His attention remained focused on the dark spring.
As long as the earth-shaking tremors ceased, he planned to make a hasty retreat with the Samaritan Women's Spring water he had collected.
One drop, two drops, three drops. The spring water entered the golden canister at a painstakingly slow pace, as if it might stop at any moment. His prepared canister, on the other hand, grew increasingly rusty and fragile.
Lumian watched the sluggish progress, concerned that the pale-white spring water might surge again.
Frustration and anxiety welled up inside him.
Hence, he silently cursed to relieve his pent-up emotions.
Drip, drip. He had only filled a third of the bottle when Hela decided to stop and seal the golden canister.
I mustn't be greedy... Lumian warned himself, putting an end to the collection of Samaritan Women's Spring with Hela.
Together, they sprinted toward the summit of the slope.
Before long, the sound of water echoed from behind them.
Once more, the pale-white spring gushed forth from the pitch-black hole!
Without looking back to assess the situation, they continued their sprint through the grayish-white fog, as if a relentless, intangible monster pursued them.

In a matter of seconds, they finally reached the fog's edge. Lumian grabbed Hela's arm and propelled himself forward.
Exiting the shroud of grayish-white fog, Lumian finally breathed a sigh of relief. The coldness in his body abated, and his thoughts settled significantly.
...
Psychic Piercing!
Jenna emerged from the shadows, her eyes crackling with lightning.
The man in the Warlock robe heard a surreal crack and felt an intense surge of pain radiate from the depths of his Spirit Body, gripping his mind.
Instinctively, he crumpled to the ground, curling up in an attempt to alleviate the agony.
Franca wasted no time and seized the moment. She pointed the mirror she held at him.
As the Warlock-clad entrustee appeared in the mirror, black flames ignited in Franca's palm and spread across the glass.
Demoness's Curse!
Black flames erupted from the man's body, weakening his struggling spirit.
Soon after, crystalline ice encased him layer by layer, and colorless spider silk cocooned him, revealing his form.
Franca's intention was to restrain him, not kill him. After all, nobody knew if he was involved in any corruption or high-level matters, and reckless spirit channeling could lead to accidents.
Seeing the man weakened and heavily restrained, Franca whispered in surprise,
"That's it?"
She had no doubt that she and Jenna could defeat the other party with a surprise attack, but she hadn't expected it to be so straightforward.
In the next moment, the man struggled to speak under the threefold control of black flames, ice, and spider silk, his voice faint but determined. "You're committing a crime!"
As soon as he finished speaking, a violent tremor emanated from deep underground. A rock from the tunnel's ceiling plummeted toward Jenna's head.
Jenna swiftly rolled to dodge, but she still felt the impact of falling debris.
Franca faced a similar predicament. She sensed that if this continued, the entire tunnel might collapse. Even with Mirror Substitution, she couldn't guarantee her safety in this segment of the tunnel.

Without hesitation, she clenched her right hand, reigniting the remaining black flames within the entrustee's body.
Black flames engulfed his Spirit Body, and the Warlock-dressed man quickly met his end.
The tunnel's tremors ceased, leaving nothing but dust hanging in the air.
Franca breathed a sigh of relief and wasted no time. She swiftly set up a spirit channeling ritual, while Jenna kept a vigilant eye out for any passersby while kneading her shoulders and back.
After a while, Franca completed the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell. Holding the mirror, she gazed at the pale-white face with a hint of arrogance and inquired, "How much do you know about the secrets of the Deep Valley Quarry?"
The man's spirit responded in a daze, "Some seek to use machinery to prolong their lives, while others seek machinery to acquire life.
"A portion of the Deep Valley Cloister is sliding into the abyss."
Can't you be more specific? Franca pressed, "Which organization are you from? Why are you exploiting the gatekeeper's disappearance?"
Just as the man was about to respond, an ever-changing fog suddenly enveloped the mirror.
Crack!
The mirror in Franca's hand shattered instantly.
Bang!
The man's body, encased in ice and spider silk, exploded. His flesh disintegrated into mist that filled the surroundings.
Almost simultaneously, Franca shattered like a mirror, breaking into fragments that fell to the ground.
Her figure quickly outlined at the tunnel's intersection and appeared beside Jenna.
"As expected, something was amiss," Franca said solemnly, watching as the indeterminate blood mist gradually settled and melded with the ground.
By that point, the corpse had transformed into a pile of minced meat, with only the metal items on it remaining intact.
Franca and Jenna conducted a simple search and found a brass key and coins worth 200 to 300 verl d'or.
They didn't dare linger. After erasing any traces of their presence, they made their exit.
Approximately two to three minutes later, a pair of legs clad in knee-length brown boots materialized beside the puddle of flesh and blood, clutching a shrunken, golden kettle with a protruding wick.
...

The scorching sunlight bathed the entrance to the catacombs of Place du Purgatoire, and Lumian felt as though he had returned from the kingdom of the dead to the world of the living. The chill that had permeated his body gradually dissipated.

Turning to Hela, whose pale-white complexion, purplish-red livor mortis, and signs of decay had yet to fully heal, he smiled and remarked, "Even though it wasn't a real battle, it's the closest I've come to death."

Hela replied simply, "Those who can retain a mark in the pale-white spring water for a long time were once formidable individuals."

As Lumian strolled to the edge of the square, he casually inquired, "What's the purpose of the Samaritan Women's Spring? You can't actually use it to forget the past and pain, can you?"

Hela shook her head.

"For me, it can serve as a replacement for a certain ritual, or rather, become the central element of another ritual."

Lumian didn't fully grasp the concept, so he didn't press for more details.

Soon, however, he noticed that the residual chill in his body and thoughts hadn't completely vanished just because he had left the catacombs.

While it had mostly dissipated, it seemed to linger within him, resurfacing gradually as night fell.

"The abnormality in our bodies is still present," Lumian reminded Hela with a solemn tone.

Hela nodded.

"I have a solution. The one who tasked you with obtaining the spring water should have a solution as well."

Lumian acknowledged her words briefly and bid farewell to Hela, making his way toward the public carriage stop.

Compared to the abnormality of gradually dying, he was more concerned about the Earth Blood ore that had corroded his palm, as well as the bizarre "rust."

Chapter 356: Scar

As time ticked away, Lumian sensed his body temperature slowly dissipating. Even the blazing sun outside the public carriage window couldn't stave off this change.

His thoughts dulled, and the skin on the back of his hand turned a pallid white.

At last, Lumian made it to the market district.

As he disembarked from the public carriage, his limbs seemed to stiffen.

Just as he turned onto Rue des Blouses Blanches, a man who approached him was taken aback. He let out a quiet gasp, his eyes filled with fear.

Lumian instinctively glanced to the side, assessing his reflection in the café's glass window.

His blonde-black hair appeared as if it hadn't been washed for days, and his face had turned a sickly shade of pale blue. There were purplish-red patches and signs of decay on his neck, and his eyes mirrored the cold emptiness of a corpse that had lain dead for many days.

Lumian smirked at the man and remarked, "Well, what do you think? Have I convincingly transformed into a zombie?"

He noticed his voice adopting a colder tone, reminiscent of Hela.

The gentleman silently cursed and bypassed the fellow who appeared ready to attend a masquerade ball.

Lumian knew the corruption consuming him was worsening. He quickened his pace and reached the safe house he hadn't yet turned over.

Swiftly, he arranged the altar, unfolded a piece of paper, and penned a brief letter to Madam Magician.

"I've fulfilled Madam Justice's mission and acquired the spring water of Samaritan Women's Spring, but I'm also succumbing to corruption. It's worsening. How can I eradicate it?"

After neatly folding the letter, Lumian summoned Madam Magician's messenger.

The "doll" messenger materialized above the blue candle flame and gave Lumian an approving nod.

"I'm quite fond of your current demeanor, though your hair is too greasy."

The aura of near-death? Lumian's urge to mutter was weaker than before.

After watching the "doll" messenger depart, he set a fifteen-minute time limit. If Madam Magician didn't respond by then, he'd have to explore other avenues to rid himself of the corruption. One

possibility was to perform a ritual and beseech Mr. Fool.
Tick, tock. The needle on the pocket watch borrowed from Salle de Bal Brise maintained a steady rhythm. However, Lumian had previously noticed that it was nearly ten minutes slow. It was as if the closer he came to the Samaritan Women's Spring, the slower it ticked.
Suddenly, starlight materialized from the void, forming a mysterious and ethereal door.
The door swung open, and Madam Magician emerged, dressed in a brownish-yellow gown. Beyond the door, there was a profound darkness adorned with starlight.
The Tarot Club's Major Arcana card holder glanced at Lumian and gave a gentle nod.
"Pray to Mr. Fool for an angel's purification."
I'll still have to pray to Mr. Fool? Lumian didn't probe further. He proceeded with the ritual at the prepared altar.
He lit the candles in the correct sequence and let the extract drip. After burning the herbs, he stepped back, gazing at the candle flames, and intoned in a deep voice, "The Fool that doesn't belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck...
"I implore you,
"I implore you to cleanse the corruption within me..."
Once the ritual concluded, Lumian once again saw an angel formed from light, surrounded by twelve pairs of luminous wings.
With only his peripheral vision remaining, he felt the chill in his body dissipate, and his body temperature quickly returned to normal.
Before long, the angel departed. Lumian looked at the full-length mirror in the room and realized that his complexion, hair, and eyes had completely returned to normal. The purplish-red livor mortis had vanished entirely. Only a few traces of decay remained, but there were no signs of deterioration. It seemed that these remnants would heal with time.
Lumian expressed heartfelt gratitude to Mr. Fool and concluded the ritual.
As he turned to Madam Magician, a sudden recollection struck him, and he hastily raised his right hand to inspect his palm.
The wound from the corrosion of the Earth Blood ore was still there. Though it was no longer as vividly red as when it first fused with the "rust," it hadn't faded either. It appeared as if he had marked his palm with a few scars using blood.
Sensing a faint undercurrent of madness and violence emanating from his right palm, Lumian furrowed his brow in confusion.

"Can't this be cleansed?"
Madam Magician fixed her gaze on his right palm for a few moments but didn't provide a direct answer. Instead, she spoke, "Share the details with me."
She took the initiative to pull up a chair and sat down, showing no inclination to continue the conversation standing.
Lumian settled into a chair at the wooden table, beginning with Madam Justice's assignment and recounting how he and Hela had each extracted a third of a canister's worth of Samaritan Women's Spring water.
He narrated the encounter with the colossal, frenzied figure and the bizarre power. Simultaneously, he didn't omit any details about Monette's appearance and actions, as well as the curious "return" of the Earth Blood ore.
Madam Magician listened to Lumian's account in silence before letting out a chuckle.
"It's quite challenging for truly formidable figures to die completely. Even without Beyonder characteristics, bodies, or souls, they often leave behind mental imprints, death marks, residual auras, and other remnants. When the right conditions align, they may find a way back into the real world with a suitable vessel."
"Like the Oldest One, the Creator?" Lumian grasped the gist of Madam Magician's explanation and inquired further, "So, who is this figure?"
Madam Magician took a moment to reflect and replied, "It's likely the Blood Emperor of the Fourth Epoch, Alista Tudor."
"The Blood Emperor? One of the Four Emperors?" Lumian had heard this title and name mentioned by Gardner Martin.
Alista Tudor's empire once spanned what was present-day Intis. The Trier, submerged underground, had served as His capital.
According to Gardner Martin, the Blood Emperor was a true deity who grasped the Hunter pathway, signifying that He was a Sequence 0 Red Priest!
"That's correct," Madam Magician affirmed. "The War of the Four Emperors was a genuine conflict among gods. Alista Tudor met His end in the submerged Fourth Epoch Trier, which also caused the capital to sink underground. He had long descended into madness and committed numerous atrocities. Rumor has it that He nearly entombed all the deities who participated in the war alongside Him. Even now, many remnants of that war lie buried beneath Trier, profoundly shaping some aspects of the Fifth Epoch's history."
The Fifth Epoch, the epoch in which Lumian and his companions

resided, was often referred to as the Iron Age.
Nearly burying all the deities who participated in the war? The Blood Emperor was truly deranged... Lumian mused, genuinely intrigued.
"What occurred during the War of the Four Emperors?"
"I'm not entirely certain either," Madam Magician admitted with a shrug. "I've only heard about it from two beings who personally witnessed the war. Even They don't possess the full picture. After all, one should not look directly at a god. Remember, never look directly at a god, even if it's an incomplete Mythical Creature transformed from a Sequence 4 saint."
Beings who had personally experienced the War of the Four Emperors and still survived to this day? To have participated in such a divine conflict, they must be at least angels... Could they be the two angels beside Mr. Fool's throne? Yes, the Holy Bible mentioned that Mr. Fool's Angel of Time was an ancient angel, and one of them could be this figure? Lumian pieced together the information he had and ventured a guess.
Having heard Aurore mention the concept of Mythical Creatures and their associated complexities, Lumian had no doubt about the admonition "never look directly at a god."
Eagerly, Lumian asked, "So, after the Blood Emperor's demise, His mental mark, death mark, or residual aura remained sealed within the Samaritan Women's Spring?"
"That would likely be a death mark, but I suspect it's intertwined with a mental mark, residual aura, and even some lingering spirits left behind for reasons unknown. Otherwise, Blood Emperor Alista Tudor wouldn't persist in a combative state within the spring. Heh heh, combat can indeed be considered a Hunter trait," Madam Magician speculated.
As Madam Magician spoke, she extended her hand into the void, disappearing from Lumian's sight.
After a brief search, she reappeared, holding a tempting glass of Kirsch.
"Didn't your sister teach you? When you have a guest, remember to ask if they want tea or wine, or perhaps offer snacks," Madam Magician chided playfully as she took a sip of the light red wine and shook her head.
How could I remember at a time like this? Where did she get her wine? Only then did Lumian realize that he had forgotten to ask about the most important thing.
He sincerely acknowledged the lesson and then raised another query.
"What's the origins of the strange power that dragged the Blood

Emperor back into the spring?"
"I don't know," Madam Magician replied candidly. "Even a true god might not know. All I can be certain of is that it has no connection to the War of the Four Emperors."
Lumian decided to put this matter aside for now and turned his attention to his right hand, where the mysterious traces remained.
"What are these marks? Can't Mr. Fool cleanse them?"
"If this isn't corruption, it can't be cleansed," Madam Magician explained while sipping her Kirsch. "It's more similar to a mystical item embedded in your hand. It will bring about certain adverse effects, and these effects can't be cleansed unless the item itself is removed."
"A mystical item... What's its purpose and what dangers does it hold?" Lumian hadn't anticipated this revelation.
"It's useless." Madam Magician chuckled. "I mentioned it's similar, but not equivalent. It certainly isn't a direct source of power enhancement. Rumor has it that in the underground of the Fourth Epoch's Trier, there are numerous treasures left behind by Blood Emperor Alista Tudor in various hidden locations. Only those with the Tudor family's bloodline can unlock them. And now, you can unlock them as well."
So, it's like my palm contains some of Tudor's blood and aura, unrelated to Beyonder powers? Lumian tried to probe the bright red scars on his right palm with his consciousness.
As soon as the two connected, he was abruptly engulfed by a surge of frenzied, violent, terrifying, and dominating aura. The entire room, and even the entire apartment, quaked uncontrollably.

Chapter 357: Monette's True Identity

The sudden change and the frenzied aura that had affected Lumian instinctively made him withdraw his consciousness from the scar on his right palm.

The anomaly ceased, and everything returned to normal.

Lumian surveyed his surroundings, concerned that the aura might attract unwanted attention.

At that moment, the room fell unusually silent, and the surroundings dimmed slightly, as if a layer of dark-colored soundproof glass had been added.

Lumian relaxed and turned his gaze back to Madam Magician.

"What happened?"

"The trace carries the aura of Alista Tudor, but it has no practical effect. It can't intimidate others or make them submit." Madam Magician held a cup filled with Kirsch and smiled. "With the Niese Face, you can act as The Blood Emperor at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons."

It could only be used for acting or to frighten people under specific situations? Lumian nodded thoughtfully.

"What kind of negative effects will these traces have on me?"

Madam Magician chuckled.

"You'll become crazier, more ferocious, and more impulsive, but you're not lacking in those qualities already."

What she meant was that you have many similar negative effects. As long as they don't exceed the limit, there wouldn't be any problems. Or rather, you are already used to it, so it couldn't get any worse.

"That's good." Lumian heaved a sigh of relief.

Madam Magician took a sip of Kirsch and reminded him, "For now, you mainly rely on your perseverance and Alms Monk endurance to suppress the negative effects and maintain your normal state. However, when the time is right, you need to vent. It's like a reservoir. You can't keep accumulating water. You have to find an opportunity to release a portion. Otherwise, if you accumulate it day by day, it will either break the dam or spill out of the reservoir, leaving behind psychological problems."

That's true. While Alms Monk's subsequent advancement to Ascetic emphasizes endurance and accumulation, there's also an explosive aspect... Lumian understood Madam Magician's words.

Simultaneously, he thought of something.

After joining the Iron and Blood Cross Order, he would inevitably explore Underground Trier. Although he possessed the Blood Emperor's aura and had the qualifications to enter specific places

and open certain treasures, would he trigger more abnormalities and encounter more danger?
Lumian expressed his concerns, and Madam Magician nodded slightly.
"This is a completely foreseeable discovery.
"Like, uh, as the saying goes, it's both a boon and a curse."
"If you don't want to take such a risk, pray to Mr. Fool again in two or three days and ask him to help you eliminate Alista Tudor's aura. Remember, you must specify that it's the aura of a high-level Beyonder of the Hunter pathway to prevent any misunderstandings of removing any unnecessary things during the surgery."
"Can't I clear it with my daily 6 a.m. reset?" Lumian asked out of habit.
Madam Magician shook her head.
"It can't reset an aura of this level."
Lumian fell into deep thought, contemplating whether to retain Alista Tudor's bloodline aura or use a ritual to remove it.
Recalling that entering the underground to search for the Fourth Epoch Trier would undoubtedly be a mission assigned by the Iron and Blood Cross Order, and triggering an abnormality was highly likely, he steeled his resolve and chose to keep the bright red scar on his right palm.
Unlike other members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order who had been corrupted by the building at 13 Alista, only Alista Tudor's bloodline aura could allow him to withstand the same underground "treatment" as the corrupted without losing his sanity.
As for the potential dangers, he was concerned, but he could only choose the option with fewer disadvantages.
In any case, searching for the entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier wasn't his sole mission. When the time came, many members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order would undoubtedly join the effort. Gardner Martin might even lead the team. If the sky collapsed, they would all face it together!
Seeing that Lumian had made up his mind, Madam Magician didn't say anything else and quietly savored her Kirsch.
Lumian then inquired about something else.
"That group of Monette Islander swindlers, or rather, the people at Salle de Bal Unique? Could it be that they want me to obtain Alista Tudor's bloodline aura and open a treasure trove in the future? But why not obtain it themselves? They've already stolen the Earth Blood ore, and they can clearly enter the area around the Samaritan Women's Spring."

"Perhaps it's too dangerous for them, and they don't want to try it themselves. If you fail, it could unleash the Blood Emperor's remnant spirit. If you succeed, they just have to wait until you find the treasure," Madam Magician replied with a smile.
"Ushering in the Blood Emperor's remnant spirit?" Lumian expressed his puzzlement. "Back then, I felt that as long as I came into contact with the pale-white spring water, I would die immediately and completely. I probably can't become a vessel for the Blood Emperor's resurrection."
Madam Magician pondered for a moment and said, "Normally, that should be the case, but since you're a Hunter and possess Mr. Fool's seal and an angel from the Inevitability domain, once you're dragged into the spring and fused with the Blood Emperor's remnant spirit, it might trigger an unpredictable explosion, allowing Alista Tudor's figure to escape its restraints and prevent death from imprisoning Him."
Lumian pondered Madam Magician's words and felt that the more he thought about it, the more questions arose, making him feel more terrified.
Madam Magician gently swirled her glass.
"That was just my guess. The true motives of those at Salle de Bal Unique remain to be confirmed. It might even be a prank that could endanger your life to interfere with our judgment of other matters.
"In short, you have to be vigilant. Don't relax just because you feel that the other party has achieved their goal."
Lumian tersely acknowledged, indicating that he wouldn't let his guard down.
In fact, even if Madam Magician hadn't mentioned it, he would have taken precautions against the Islander swindler who always appeared underground at critical moments.
This guy was close to traumatizing him.
"Should we report the anomaly at Salle de Bal Unique to the two Churches?" Lumian inquired.
Madam Magician wore a peculiar expression as she replied, "I've been observing the dance hall for some time and realized that most of the people wearing monocles in their right eyes are normal. Only a few are problematic, and the few who are problematic are irregular. It's difficult to lock onto them as they can be one thing today and something else tomorrow.
"Furthermore, no one knows if He is among those who don't wear monocles with their right eye. To completely eliminate Him, we might have to apprehend everyone on that street and those who have visited the dance hall, either destroying or purifying them.

"However, this won't truly finish Him. It will only force Him into the shadows.
"Mr. Fool's Angel of Time is keeping an eye on this matter, hoping to find His most important avatars. Only then can we inflict pain and keep Him in check for a while."
Lumian was abnormally confused. Puzzled, he asked, "What do you mean if He is among those?"
Madam Magician spoke as if the abnormal ones were the same person.
Madam Magician pondered for a few seconds and said, "He has already interacted with you several times. It's necessary for you to understand Him to a certain extent.
"He is the great noble of the Fourth Epoch's Tudor Empire, Amon. He is also the child of the Ancient Sun God, who ruled the entire world in the Third Epoch."
"He's Amon?" Lumian recalled that the Islander swindler, Monette, had crawled out of the tomb of a member of the Amon family.
The person behind him was an ancient angel!
It's no wonder he knows so much about the Fourth Epoch tombs!
Madam Magician nodded.
"He was once a King of Angels and ascended the throne of a deity, but He was defeated by Mr. Fool. Now, He is an ordinary angel.
"He belongs to the Marauder pathway. High-ranking individuals of this pathway have a special ability called Parasitism. It is the separation of a portion of themselves and parasitize the bodies of others. There are shallow levels of Parasitism and deep levels of Parasitism. The latter can allow the host to become an avatar.
"The higher the Sequence, the more targets they can parasitize."
Lumian was alarmed and afraid as he blurted out, "Island swindler Monette has been parasitized by him?"
He was actually a formidable figure who had once fought Mr. Fool!
Madam Magician agreed with Lumian's guess.
"That's right. Every member of the Fourth Epoch Amon family is Amon. The abnormal ones in Salle de Bal Unique are also Amon. The ones who haven't shown any abnormalities are potential Amons, or potential believers of Amon."
Lumian was rendered speechless.
He found it fitting to describe those wearing monocles with their right eyes as bedbugs in Auberge du Coq Doré and cockroaches from the trash.
It was too similar!
Monette had, in a way, risen from his own grave.
"How many avatars does He have?" Lumian inquired after a brief pause.

Madam Magician shook her head and replied, "Since the Fourth Epoch, He has been hunting Beyonders of the Marauder pathway for ages, gathering many characteristics. No one knows how many avatars there are. What you need to remember is that when you encounter an Amon, there are already many Amon lurking around. They can be rats, bedbugs, or even smaller creatures."

"Isn't this perfect for monitoring others?" Lumian's hair stood on end.

He roughly understood why Amon knew he had the Earth Blood ore and could grasp his movements. He also understood why he had felt that something was amiss when he prayed for the boon the last time—the "illusion" of someone watching him.

"What's the approximate Sequence of Amon's avatar?" Lumian asked with lingering fear, recalling his desire to eliminate Monette in the fourth-level tomb.

Madam Magician finished the remaining Kirsch and tossed the glass back into the void.

"He has a way to weaken His avatar, but He's still an angel. You can't underestimate His avatar because of this. Yes, it's similar to a special scene on the third level of the tomb and below. You can determine and treat it according to the specific situation."

Lumian rubbed his temples, feeling a headache brewing. Without a clear understanding of Amon's intentions, every venture into the depths of Underground Trier was risky.

He changed the subject.

"What's the purpose of the Samaritan Women's Spring?"

Chapter 358: Negligence

Madam Magician chuckled.

"Why do you care? You can't use it. You can only use it to forget all your memories and original feelings and become a new person.

"Right, in the Corpse Collector, Sleepless, and Warrior pathways, the Samaritan Women's Spring has different uses depending on usage, ritual, and compatibility. It includes, but isn't limited to temporarily clearing memories, healing essential damage to the spirit, improving one's spiritual perception, becoming an ingredient for important rituals, and unlocking various abilities, among other things."

Corresponding to the three neighboring, exchangeable pathways, Corpse Collector, Sleepless, and Warrior? Lumian extracted crucial information.

At that very moment, Madam Magician glanced at him, her smile restrained yet knowing.

"Are there any more questions?"

Lumian took a moment to contemplate before responding, "Not for now."

Madam Magician nodded. "Then it's my turn to ask."

"Ask what?" Lumian was puzzled.

He had recounted all the details.

Madam Magician tapped her finger against the empty air in front of her.

"Why didn't you inform me that Miss Justice sent you to the Samaritan Women's Spring?"

Lumian was taken aback.

"I thought she would have informed you herself. Moreover, since she's also a Major Arcana card holder in the Tarot Club, I didn't see any need to confirm it with you."

Madam Magician wore a thoughtful expression.

"Normally, there would be no issue, but this world is filled with anomalies."

Lumian, now feeling bewildered, asked, "Is something wrong with Miss Justice?"

Madam Magician shook her head. "No, that's not it. The problem lies in the fact that shortly after you accepted the journey to the Samaritan Women's Spring, the Earth Blood ore went missing. I had no knowledge of your impending trip to the fourth level of the catacombs, and Miss Justice wasn't aware that the Earth Blood ore had fallen into someone else's hands. It's not a matter of whether you wanted to take it with you or not."

"If we had communicated beforehand, I could have delayed the

mission to ascertain the whereabouts of the Earth Blood ore or made suitable arrangements."
Lumian reflected on her words, realizing the truth in them.
Having foreseen that the Earth Blood ore would bring about certain encounters underground, she couldn't ignore the hidden connection between the loss of the Earth Blood ore and the journey to the Samaritan Women's Spring.
Lumian's negligence, or rather, his assumption of a reasonable course of action had led to the subsequent encounters that later awaited him.
Madam Magician fixed her gaze on Lumian for a few seconds before responding, "You can't entirely be faulted for how you handled the situation. I'm merely reminding you to exercise more caution in the future."
She paused, her words heavy with meaning.
"This will become even more crucial when you seek the entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier in the days to come."
"Yes, Madam Magician." Lumian accepted her guidance wholeheartedly.
After Magician disappeared with the bottle of Samaritan Women's Spring water, Lumian swiftly tidied up the altar and settled back down.
He contemplated his errors during the operation.
Firstly, Madam Magician is right. I should have informed her about Madam Justice's commission. Even if they had already communicated privately and there were no issues, I should still mention it. After all, my Major Arcana card holder isn't Justice but Magician. Helping other Major Arcana card holders requires my own Major Arcana card holder's permission.
Secondly, before entering the Samaritan Women's Spring, I should check my condition and items for a final confirmation. Unless there's a battle or an emergency, this should be a necessary process.
If I had remembered and completed this matter, I could have avoided many problems in advance. I wouldn't have brought the Earth Blood ore into the Samaritan Women's Spring area undetected. Monette, no, Amon, appeared several times and deliberately frightened me to disrupt my thoughts and keep my attention on Him instead of my own state, causing me to neglect the Earth Blood ore's "return."
Thirdly, I didn't notice Termiboros's abnormality. He remained silent in the face of Monette's appearance, unlike His vigilance and anxiety from before. Heh, although He is sealed, He can sense His surroundings through me. As an angel, how could He not notice

Amon stuffing the Earth Blood ore back into my pocket?
Furthermore, His fate is intertwined with mine. When I entered the Samaritan Women's Spring with the Earth Blood ore, my fate must have changed. *How could He not have noticed? Why didn't He warn me?*
Does He also want to use the special environment of the Samaritan Women's Spring and the abnormality caused by the Earth Blood ore to find a way to escape the seal? Yes, He was the one who warned me that the Earth Blood ore was special and said it would bring me a fortuitous encounter!
The strange power ultimately prevented Him from achieving His goal. Who could it be?
It's true that an evil god's angel can't be trusted completely. Termiboros has been acting so reliably recently. He reminds me from time to time not only to avoid dangers that can affect Him but also to lull me. He's waiting for an opportunity to stab me in the back.
Heh heh, you're a Hunter too?
After entering the Samaritan Women's Spring, there was no problem with my choices. The adverse effects erupted, and with all kinds of mental corruption stacked on top of each other, it was already very difficult for me to react. Regardless of right or wrong... If the corruption hadn't conflicted and hindered each other, I might have gone crazy on the spot.
Lumian reviewed the entire matter and suddenly chuckled.
"Termiboros, how did you not notice Monette stuffing the Earth Blood ore back to me?"
But Termiboros remained silent, withholding any response.
Lumian roughly ascertained the role this Inevitability angel had played in the recent events. He examined the items on his body, fearing that they would also lead him to "death."
Thankfully, the inanimate objects were relatively unaffected and suffered no substantial damage. As for the "rust" that the Flog boxing glove encountered, it wasn't a true attack. Apart from leaving some traces, it didn't affect its usage.
As for the gazes and dangerous creatures that wearing the boxing gloves would bring, Lumian didn't have any thoughts. He believed that the special environment of the Samaritan Women's Spring limited the corresponding negative effects.
After doing this, Lumian surveyed the surroundings. He felt an indescribable fear and disgust for the safe house that Amon had once entered. He felt as if there were eyes hidden in the surrounding air.
Of course, this was mainly psychological. After all, Madam

Magician had already visited.
After dismantling the hidden traps in the safe house, Lumian opened the door and left with all his belongings. He planned to never return, preferring to waste the rent.
...
In Trier, in a verdant park.
Magician, adorned in a brownish-yellow dress, observed a golden retriever leisurely strolling on the grassy path. She turned to the woman standing beside the dog, who wore a simple white dress with delicate green patterns. Her long blond hair flowed casually down her back, tied loosely. Her eyes resembled sparkling emeralds, mirroring the nearby trees in their clear depths.
"The Samaritan Women's Spring has been retrieved."
The woman smiled and said, "Did something happen? You should have gotten a messenger to bring it over."
Magician nodded and summarized the key information. Finally, she said, "Coincidentally, we haven't met in the past few days and haven't communicated.
"This led me to know that he had lost the Earth Blood ore, suspected of being stolen by Amon, but I didn't know that he was going to retrieve the Samaritan Women's Spring. You, on the other hand, knew that he was going to retrieve the Samaritan Women's Spring, but you didn't know that the Earth Blood ore had been stolen."
Justice listened in silence for a few seconds before sighing.
"It's very similar to that person's style..."
"Is it really that person?" Magician frowned slightly. When did He cast His gaze over? Did we fail to hide from Him since the beginning?
Justice pondered for a moment and said, "That's not surprising. The most important thing now is what arrangements He has in mind."
"I don't know," Magician replied with a self-deprecating smile. "But since the Samaritan Women's Spring incident has already occurred, I can foresee..."
As she stepped into the void, surrounded by starlight, she sighed and said, "It won't be long before Fourth Epoch Trier's door truly opens."
...
Outside an abandoned castle.
Justice materialized at the door, clutching the golden canister containing the Samaritan Women's Spring.
In front of her, a dark illusory sea materialized. She stepped into it and arrived in a special dream.

In the dream, not only was a portion of the inverted black mausoleum missing, but it had also split in half. Deep cracks covered its surface, and pale-yellow feathers stained with oil and various symbols of death were scattered everywhere.
Justice floated in midair, tipping the golden canister in her hand.
Under her guidance, a portion of the Samaritan Women's Spring's water transformed into dark rain that gently sprinkled onto the ground.
All the damage healed further, and the two halves of the mausoleum gradually closed in.
Amidst this transformation, Justice stowed away the golden canister and gazed at the remaining Samaritan Women's Spring. She muttered to herself, "Two more rounds should suffice."
...
On the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian's bedroom.
After taking a nap, he raised his right palm and realized that the bright red scar had faded significantly. It looked more like the marks left by compression.
Lumian heaved a sigh of relief. That won't attract too much attention.
His original plan was to wrap his right palm in a white bandage to prevent the Boss and the others from spotting anything amiss.
As for now, Lumian thought for a moment and wrapped the bandage around his left palm, which appeared normal.
After completing this task, he eagerly awaited the compensation Madam Justice had mentioned. He wondered when it would arrive.
He believed it wouldn't take more than a few days.
Suddenly, Lumian turned his head and looked at the window in the alley behind him.
Bang! Bang! Bang!
There were knocks on the glass.

Chapter 359: Malady God

Lumian glanced over and noticed Franca, clad in a blouse, patting the glass.
He opened the window, a grin on his face, and asked, "Why didn't you use the front door?"
"Don't you often resort to window-climbing antics?" Franca leaped into the room with grace, followed by Jenna.
Jenna observed for a moment and pointed at Lumian's left palm.
"Are you injured?"
Why's it bandaged?
Lumian chuckled.
"I headed into the fourth level of the catacombs and crossed paths with a creature that seemed like an evil spirit. I had an intense battle with it and ended up with a few scratches."
Franca examined Lumian's left palm, perplexed. "Really? The fourth level of the catacombs..."
"Believe it or not, that's your choice," Lumian replied with a smile.
Franca got the message and dropped the subject.
Jenna, however, muttered under her breath, "I think it's a mix of truth and lies..."
Lumian chose to ignore Jenna's comment and asked, "Did something happen to you guys too?"
"That's right." Franca proceeded to recount their encounter in detail and produced a brass key. She eagerly suggested, "Should we try to divine which door this key opens? Whoever's offering a bounty of 50,000 verl d'or must be loaded!"
Lumian scoffed.
"You've got an adventurous spirit, alright.
"Of course, a matter this dark should be left to the Purifiers for investigation. Besides, it involves some monks from the God of Steam and Machinery Church descending into the abyss. You don't really want to explore the secret cave in the Deep Valley Quarry on your own, do you?"
Franca admitted sheepishly, "To be honest, I'm tempted. The idea of extending life through machinery and giving life to machinery fascinates me. But my rationality keeps me in check."
Jenna stayed silent, indicating that she had discussed this with Franca on the way.
After sharing her delusions, Franca agreed to let Jenna find a way to hand over the key to the Purifiers and report their encounter.
She then turned to Jenna. "I plan to head to Rue des Fontaines. What about you?"
Jenna had already made plans. She said to Lumian, "Didn't you ask

me to find out where the factory owner lives? Well, I've followed him and gathered plenty of information. Now we can locate the families awaiting compensation and guide them into demanding what's rightfully theirs."
Lumian replied with a smile, "I didn't ask you to do it; you wanted to."
Franca acknowledged his response curtly before proceeding with her plan to visit Rue des Fontaines.
...
In Quartier du Jardin Botanique, at the intersection of Rue Pasteur and Rue Evelyn.
The buildings bore a mishmash of components that seemed like they didn't belong, like building blocks assembled by a careless child. The place exuded an unsettling vibe, akin to a wild and unstable forest.
Jenna pointed toward a woman crouched by the street, washing clothes, and said, "That's Madame Mogana. Her husband also perished in that accident a few years ago."
Madame Mogana wore a worn-out grayish-white patched dress, her face marked by wrinkles that spoke of over fifty years of life.
Lumian, having digested a bit more of the potion's effects after igniting the Bottle of Fiction, was in no rush. He replied, "You handle it."
Jenna gazed silently at the gaunt, high-cheekboned Madame Mogana. After a few seconds, she spoke, "Truth be told, I don't really like her."
Curiosity piqued, Lumian asked, "Why's that?"
Jenna let out a sigh and explained, "She's quite malicious. The kind of person who wishes ill upon her neighbor when she's going through a tough time. She does despicable things even when there's no gain for her.
"As you know, my mother was a theater actress and was somewhat literate. She used to work as a tutor for a middle-class family. It was a respectable job with good pay. But when Madame Mogana found out about it, she followed my mother and discovered the family. She told the servants who were out running errands that my mother was moonlighting as a street girl, that she was immoral and skilled at seducing her male employer. Before long, my mother was fired. She had to settle for jobs as a cleaning lady, a dishwashing maid, or even working in a chemical plant.
"Madame Mogana, illiterate as she is, had no chance of getting the job my mother lost because of her actions, but she seemed oddly pleased."

Lumian nodded in understanding. "Jealousy is indeed one of humanity's cardinal sins. Why didn't you take revenge on her?"
Jenna whispered with a chuckle, "That was a long time ago. Besides, in a place like this, similar things are bound to happen sooner or later. When my father passed away, my brother was considered a strong lad. Otherwise, our family would have been in an even worse state. If a widow moved in with her daughter, someone would come knocking on your door the next day, cursing you and claiming that her husband stole a few glances at you. The neighbor would pretend to be friendly and introduce you to her male relatives.
"If you refused, that relative of hers would sit outside your door and drink every day. The police didn't bother with such matters, and you couldn't count on anyone else for help. One day, when he got really drunk and bold, I don't need to spell out what would happen, right?
"Sometimes, the police would arrest him, but arresting one would only bring in a second or third. They might even enrage his relatives. They'd smash your window every night, pile feces at your door, and recruit older kids to harass your daughter.
"But the worst part was being targeted by the mob.
"To survive in a place like this, you either needed a few adult men in the house or you had to be tough and make it clear that you wouldn't back down even if it cost you your life. Thankfully, when our lease ended, my mother moved to the other end of the street, and the environment improved significantly."
Jenna's words were spoken as if she had witnessed such hardships many times before.
While Lumian had faced his own share of difficulties, ones worse than Jenna's, he had never encountered anything like that. The conflicts and confrontations among wanderers were even more overt. It was a matter of either being beaten into submission, forcing others into submission, or hovering on the fringes like feral dogs, scavenging what remained of others. When he arrived in Cordu, his sister, a Beyonder, protected him, allowing him to play pranks without worry. The other villagers were mainly subjected to the padre's family's bullying.
He looked at Jenna, who was recounting her past, and asked thoughtfully, "Didn't you say that everyone around here is just trying to survive?"
Jenna cursed, frustration evident in her gestures as she gestured toward the woman washing clothes not far away with her chin. "Dammit, that doesn't excuse their vileness. Take Madame Mogana, for instance. She works three part-time jobs a day just to

give her son a chance to escape this place. Heh heh. You might not believe it, but despite maliciously slandering my mother, she sometimes slips me a piece of bread when I'm hungry and waiting for my mother to come home."
Lumian glanced at Madame Mogana.
"People like her are easily instigated."
"Exactly," Jenna affirmed with a nod and walked over.
Her demeanor shifted dramatically as Jenna shouted at the woman washing clothes, "Madame Mogana, did you know? That damned Alphonse betrayed us!
"That piece of dogsh*t always tells us to wait a little longer. He claims that since the court has already passed the verdict, Edmund Sr. would surely compensate us. But that scheming swine plans to run away, with no intention of giving us a single coppet!
"That swine Alphonse must have secretly pocketed his share to say such a thing!"
Madame Mogana stood up, water droplets trickling from her rough fingers.
Her expression twisted with a mix of anger and concern as she asked, "Is that true? I'm going to confront that swine!"
Jenna's face also contorted with resentment.
"We can't waste time on him now. Edmund Sr. is on the verge of escaping!
"Let's hurry and stop him. I know where their family lives!"
Lumian stood about five to six meters away, listening as Jenna stirred up the locals who were waiting for compensation. He casually surveyed the area and realized that this place was similar to Rue Anarchie. Vendors, children, women, and a few men mingled together, crowding most of the road. Occasionally, regular carriages passing by would alter their route after a brief observation.
In the midst of this bustling scene, one individual stood out noticeably.
Draped in an old linen shirt and dark pants, his face was relatively clean, and his hair neatly combed. He contrasted sharply with the surrounding vendors and residents.
At that moment, the man was engaged in conversation with a few women holding long sticks of rye bread.
He presented a stack of banknotes, not too thick or thin, and counted them meticulously, one by one.
"195, 200... Check if it's 200 verl d'or?
"If you don't trust me, you can count it yourselves."
The smallest denomination of the banknotes was 5 verl d'or.
The women had likely never held so much cash before. They

trembled as they counted and confirmed that it was indeed 200 verl d'or.
The man took the banknotes back and counted them again.
"195, 200, 205... See, as long as you sincerely utter God's name, you get an extra banknote with each count!"
Impressive magic tricks... A swindler? Whenever Lumian encountered swindlers, he couldn't help but recall Monette and the Salle de Bal Unique. Anger and hostility welled up within him.
The women recounted the money and realized there were indeed 41 banknotes. There was an extra note—an extra 5 verl d'or!
Upon seeing this, the middle-aged man said with solemnity, "My Lord is the ruler of all diseases. If you believe in Him, you'll never fall sick again. Even if you do fall ill, you'll recover quickly.
"Illness is the punishment of the Malady God. If you have faith in the Malady God and devoutly worship Him, He will spare you..."
Hearing these words, Lumian's eyes narrowed as he approached.
He drew his revolver, flipped it skillfully, and then swung it at the middle-aged man's head.
Bam!
Instinctively, the middle-aged man crouched down, clutching his head. He couldn't even scream.
Between his fingers, bright red blood began to flow.
Amidst the bewildered and fearful gazes of the surrounding crowd, Lumian crouched down, shaking the barrel of his gun. He smiled at the middle-aged man and remarked, "Come, let's see how the Malady God heals you."
The middle-aged man yelled in shock, fear, and anger, "Malady God, hiss, the Malady God will punish you!"
Lumian picked up the banknotes that had fallen and handed them back to him.
"If you can't count an additional 100,000 verl d'or today, don't even dream of leaving."
With that, he raised his revolver and struck the man in the side of his face, causing blood to splatter in all directions. His face caved in, and his teeth were sent flying.

Chapter 360: Physical and Mental Wellbeing

The middle-aged man's fear-filled gaze locked onto Lumian, uncertain about what had triggered this sudden confrontation.

He wasn't the one being deceived, nor was he one of the mobsters who held sway over this neighborhood. He wasn't a relative or a friend of theirs. So, why was Lumian rushing up to assault him like this?

Adding to the confusion, Lumian didn't even give him a chance to defend himself. He unleashed a blow after each sentence!

His eyes fell upon the revolver, and he discreetly glanced at his aides concealed in the shadows. Their hesitance to intervene weighed heavily on his heart.

He couldn't afford to threaten Lumian or resist him. Trembling, he stammered, "I-I can't produce that much money. I didn't bring that kind of cash."

Lumian responded with a regretful smile, "How disappointing. I'm short of 100,000 verl d'or. Who taught you the magic of counting money? Who introduced you to the Malady God?"

The middle-aged man's throat tightened, and he remained silent.

With an air of calmness, Lumian opened the revolver's cylinder, revealing the yellow bullets to his captive.

He then closed the cylinder and pressed the muzzle against the middle-aged man's forehead.

"Three, two..." Lumian's finger on the trigger moved back with each count down.

Panic and terror swelled within the middle-aged man's eyes.

Though he doubted anyone would dare to shoot him in broad daylight, this man had started the encounter with an inexplicable beating. It was impossible to predict how much further he might go.

Just as Lumian reached the final count, the middle-aged man cried out in desperation, "It's the Envoy!"

"Envoy?" Lumian arched an eyebrow.

With his psychological defenses shattered, the middle-aged man abandoned any hope of escaping unscathed. He blurted out, "The Envoy of the Malady God!

"He approached me, taught me some tricks, and told me about the Malady God. He asked me to help him recruit believers, promising a share of the profits."

Is he a genuine believer in an evil god, a swindler exploiting a deity's name for riches, or perhaps a blend of both? Lumian withdrew the revolver from the middle-aged man's forehead and lightly tapped his still-intact cheek with it. A smile crossed his face

as he remarked, "Now, that's more like it. All it took was a little chat, didn't it?"
Bang!
A bullet tore through the air, embedding itself into a nearby felled tree.
Lumian exclaimed.
"Sorry, it went off accidentally. I didn't scare you, did I?"
The middle-aged man's heart pounded wildly, and a small puddle formed beneath him.
Lumian cast a brief glance at the trembling man and offered another reassuring smile.
"What's the name of this envoy of the Malady God? Where does he reside, and what does he look like? Lately, I've been running low on funds, so I thought I'd pay him a little visit."
Inwardly, Lumian pondered,
He didn't react to that little prank just now. He's not a bestowed...
The middle-aged man vigorously shook his head.
"I-I don't know."
Seeing Lumian raise the revolver once more, he hastily amended his response, "All I can tell you is that he's tall and slender, with pale skin, almost as if he's chronically ill. His eyes are a grayish-blue shade, and he has black hair. It's short, like the haircut of a wealthy boss's secretary.
"He visits me once a week, but I have no clue how to track him down."
Meanwhile, Jenna had joined Madame Mogana and the others, her curiosity piqued by Lumian's actions. She stole a moment to cast a glance in his direction, wondering what her Hunter companion had uncovered and what he was up to.
However, the urgency of the situation prevented her from inquiring at that moment.
Jenna had effectively instigated several individuals who had been long-awaiting compensation. The more these wronged souls spoke, the fiercer their fury grew. Some had already taken it upon themselves to seek out other victims or their families, urging Jenna to lead them in confronting the factory owner named Edmund.
In the midst of this mounting outrage, Jenna found that she no longer needed to actively instigate. The collective anger had taken on a life of its own, and individuals were stepping forward to aid her in this quest.
As they hurried toward the neighborhood where Edmund Sr. resided, Jenna had an epiphany.
To instigate someone, she had to converse with them, but to

instigate a group of people, she didn't need to personally converse with every member of the group to incite them. Understanding the situation and igniting the spark in a few initial individuals was sufficient. The ignited ones would, in turn, become agents of instigation, rallying more people to their cause in a snowballing effect.

While Jenna and the mob progressed toward their destination, Lumian remained behind to extract more information from the middle-aged man. After confirming that he couldn't elicit any further details, he rose to address the deceived women who had been observing the unfolding events.

"You heard him. This guy is trying to deceive you. Do you intend to let him off the hook?"

Lumian had discreetly employed the Niese Face to alter his appearance slightly when confronting the middle-aged man, ensuring that no one would associate him with the wanted criminal, Lumian Lee.

One of the women present had actually been the middle-aged man's collaborator, assisting in the preaching and swindling of money. In this dire situation, she dared not utter a word and looked to the others for guidance.

Among the women, some were brimming with anger, ready to hand the con artist over to the authorities, while others cowered, fearing that the swindler might have dangerous accomplices who would seek revenge.

Lumian observed in silence as they voiced their opinions, casually scanning the onlookers nearby.

Among the bystanders, he noticed three men attempting to slip away unnoticed.

These three were the accomplices of the swindler, responsible for resorting to violence when required.

Without hesitation, Lumian raised his revolver and discharged three rounds.

The trio let out cries of pain and crumpled to the ground, suffering from wounds to their legs and calves, blood streaming freely.

"No need to worry about them seeking revenge," Lumian assured the women with a grin.

The victims, their emotions running high, fell silent, almost like statues.

After a few seconds, they stammered, "It's up to you..."

Lumian nodded with satisfaction and motioned for the trembling cheat and his injured accomplices.

"Take them to the nearest... Uh, Steam Cathedral."

...

At the intersection of Quartier de l'Observatoire and Quartier du Jardin Botanique, 5 Avenue Sèlbù, a swarm of men and women dressed in tattered attire surged toward a beige three-story building.
The two guards stationed at the entrance observed the approaching, agitated crowd and swiftly withdrew their legally owned semi-automatic revolvers. Their voices rang out, commanding, "Halt!"
Confronted with the sight of firearms, even Madame Mogana and her determined followers involuntarily slowed their advance.
The presence of the weapons was undeniably daunting.
Sensing the hesitation, Jenna rushed to the forefront and hollered at the two guards, "We're here to demand our rightful compensation. The court has already rendered its verdict!
"You sons of bitches, go ahead and shoot if you dare!
"Do you even have enough dogsh*t bullets? Can you take down all of us? If not, each of us will take a bite out of you that you won't recover from!"
With fiery determination, she strode toward the entrance.
Beads of sweat formed on the palms of the two guards as they peered out at the sea of faces. The sheer number of debt collectors was overwhelming, their exact count obscured by the throng.
It was impossible to predict the response if they opened fire on the crowd. They felt exposed and isolated, like logs confronting a relentless flood.
Jenna, utilizing her Instigation ability, pressed forward with her rhetoric.
"If we disable or kill you, do you think you'll still receive your compensation?
"Look at us. Our due compensation has been withheld for years. Are you certain you'll get your payment from that stingy old scrooge? His family might flee town tomorrow!"
The two guards were taken aback.
This was indeed a problem.
Furthermore, they were well aware that the boss's family had liquidated most of their assets and were on the verge of fleeing the city in two days, seeking refuge in another province. Would they take two injured and incapacitated bodyguards along? Would they seize the opportunity to withhold compensation?
The harsh reality was laid bare before them!
As the guards hesitated, Jenna had already reached the entrance, with the crowd of debt collectors close behind.
Instinctively, one of the guards followed standard procedure, raising his right hand and firing a warning shot into the sky,

attempting to deter the approaching horde. The other guard tried to subdue an elegant-looking young woman who appeared to lack substantial combat prowess.
Jenna recoiled momentarily, grabbed hold of the guard's arm, and unceremoniously brought him crashing to the ground, causing his firearm to skid away.
Spurred by the gunshot and Jenna's boldness, Madame Mogana picked up the semi-automatic revolver. Although she wasn't familiar with its operation, her resolve surged, and she sprinted toward the entrance, cursing all the way.
The remaining guard hesitated for a fleeting moment before relenting, opting not to open fire on the advancing crowd and instead allowing them to swarm into the house.
Inside the living room, Edmund Sr. and his family, on the brink of departure, found themselves instantly encircled by Jenna's nearly hundred-strong assembly of debt collectors. It was an impenetrable wall of humanity.
Clutching a revolver, Edmund Sr. voiced his trepidation, "What do you intend to do?"
"We're here for our money!" Jenna seized the revolver from Madame Mogana's trembling hands and leveled it at Edmund Sr. She declared, "Without the compensation we're owed, we won't survive. Let's find out who meets their end today!"
Edmund's hand trembled, as though he had contracted an incurable ailment.
...
Outside a Steam Cathedral that bore a resemblance to a small factory, Lumian gave instructions to the woman assisting the injured swindler.
"Take them to the padre and have them explain the money conjuring magic and their association with the Malady God. If they refuse to talk, provide an account on their behalf."
The women nodded solemnly and, with their black eye, guided the swindler's group into the cathedral, a trail of blood marking their passage.
Lumian holstered his revolver and observed silently from the doorway.
He reflected with a touch of amusement, Madam Magician's suggestion is indeed on point. It's healthy both physically and mentally to let off some steam now and then.
Of all things to believe in, they choose an evil god, and on top of that, they're swindlers!
After a mere two minutes, Lumian casually strolled away, while the police officers hurriedly arrived on the scene.

...
Lumian unexpectedly crossed paths with Jenna and the jubilant debt collectors outside 5 Avenue Sèlbù.
"So quickly?" he inquired, surprise evident in his tone.
Jenna pursed her lips.
"I didn't anticipate it happening this swiftly either. I was prepared for someone to call the police and handle the situation accordingly. However, once we had Edmund Sr. and his family surrounded, and we issued our threats, he yielded and began paying according to the list.
"Damn it, his family's cash, gold, and other valuables added up to more than enough for our compensation. There's even a surplus. And that doesn't even account for his assets that haven't been liquidated yet. He delayed our compensation for so long!"
Lumian chuckled.
"Giving always stings. Sometimes things seem complex, but when you truly commit to them, they become simple. And then there are situations that seem straightforward but turn out to be fraught with twists and turns that nearly cost you everything."
His words carried the weight of experience.
Jenna knew that Lumian needed gold, and the compensation she had received came in the form of various types of gold jewelry, which were collectively worth 3,000 verl d'or at their pure gold value.
She offered, "Here, I'll sell these to you."
Lumian fell briefly silent before responding, "I'll withdraw the money from Salle de Bal Brise."
He only had banknotes and silver coins totaling just over 600 verl d'or on him.
In the evening, Lumian found himself with some free time and leisurely returned to Auberge du Coq Doré. He descended to the basement bar and spotted Charlie, beer in hand, regaling a group of patrons with stories.
Lumian grinned and declared, "Drinks are on me!"
Amidst the cheers of 20 to 30 people, Lumian added a playful twist, "Charlie's footing the bill!"
Charlie's expression froze.
Lumian chuckled and shouted again, "And if he does a strip dance, I might even cover that too!"

Chapter 361: Farewell

Recently, those who frequented the basement bar had grown indifferent to Charlie's lectures on respectability and civility. Now, with a chance to tease him, they became exceptionally excited and engaged in a shouting match.

Dressed in a white shirt and an unbuttoned black vest, Charlie hesitated between buying drinks for nearly 30 people or performing a striptease.

Swiftly, he set down his beer and leaped onto a small round table.

In the past, when he was drunk here, he had done all sorts of foolish things. *Why should he be afraid of a striptease?*

Lumian smiled and applauded, taking out a 20 verl d'or banknote and placing it on the bar counter. He said to Boss Pavard Neeson, "A drink for everyone. Let them have whatever they want."

With that, he picked up his glass of Lanti Proof and watched as Charlie clumsily gyrated his hips and carefully unbuttoned his shirt amidst the cheers.

"More passion! More energy!" Lumian shouted, as if he were watching a show.

The other patrons chimed in.

Sweat beaded on Charlie's forehead, fearing that excessive energy from removing his clothes might damage his shirt.

This wasn't a cheap old linen shirt!

After some thought, he decided to take it off as one would a sweater since the top buttons on his shirt were already undone.

Lumian took another sip of the Lanti Proof and leaned back at the bar counter. He glanced at Gabriel, who was wearing black-framed glasses and dark suspenders, and asked with amusement, "You're early today?"

Hadn't this playwright, accustomed to staying up late, only come here for a drink after midnight?

Gabriel held the green absinthe and smiled calmly.

"I'm moving out tomorrow."

"Lightseeker has begun airing?" Lumian immediately had a guess.

Gabriel ruffled his disheveled brown hair and smiled.

"Not yet, but after rehearsing for a while, both Monsieur Lopp and the directors and actors at Théâtre de la Renaissance think highly of me. They're very confident. I won't have to worry about my living expenses even after moving to a more expensive place and spending the 1,000 verl d'or advance. As you know, I don't write trite stories for tabloids anymore."

"Where are you planning to move to?" Lumian asked casually.

Gabriel said with a yearning expression, "Rue Saint-Michel in

Quartier 2, where many authors and painters find their haven. Not far away is the National Museum, the Trier Art Center, various galleries, and sculptures of various forms."
Quartier 2, also known as the arts district or financial district, was a blend of ancient charm and modern opulence, housing not only the artistic community but also the financial heart of the city. It was home to major banks like the Intis Central Bank and the Trier Bank, along with financial institutions, the Trier Stock Exchange, and the Intis Futures Market.
Rue Saint-Michel, on the outskirts of this vibrant district, offered affordable rent, making it an attractive choice for artists and writers.
Lumian couldn't resist recalling Aurore's teasing about Rue Saint-Michel, and he playfully paraphrased it, poking fun at the struggling poets. "What a fantastic place! You might toss a brick and hit three authors and two painters, and let's not forget those poets who die without anyone noticing."
Gabriel, slightly embarrassed, took a sip of his absinthe.
"However, that's indeed the most suitable place for artistic exchange and creativity. It's not like here, where it's relatively quiet only at night, but it's only relative. And the repulsive bedbugs..."
Gabriel suddenly remembered that the violent and elegant mob leader beside him was the current boss of Auberge du Coq Doré. He quickly shut his mouth.
At that moment, Charlie completed his striptease act and donned his shirt once more. He skillfully navigated his way out of the crowd of patrons, who had "maliciously" remarked on his physique, and settled beside Lumian. He casually remarked, "I've been swamped lately. Haven't been around for a few days. As soon as I get home, I feel like collapsing into bed. You see, this is the drawback of being a decent bloke. Sigh, why in the world are they suddenly launching such a massive investigation into those wanted criminals from Cordu?"
Oh, you've become much smarter. Lumian, who was keen on improving his rhetoric, replied with a smile, "What concern is Cordu's business to me, Ciel Dubois?"
Having contracted the Niese Face from the Human-Faced Mantis, he wasn't particularly concerned about being recognized by the authorities.
Seeing Lumian's self-assured demeanor, Charlie dropped the subject. He eagerly mentioned that a colleague had introduced him to a female teacher. Although she wasn't interested in him romantically, it marked another stride towards his quest for true

dignity.
They continued to enjoy their drinks until nearly midnight. Lumian and Gabriel, who was set to move the following day, bid Charlie farewell and ascended the stairs to the second floor.
Gabriel's gaze fixated on the corridor wall, illuminated solely by a gas wall lamp and adorned with newspapers and faded pink paper. Suddenly, he let out a heartfelt sigh.
"It's only when I'm on the verge of leaving that I realize there's something worth reminiscing about here.
"When I first moved in, I thought it wouldn't be long before I'd escape this dump—well, this wretched motel—with my talents. Who would've guessed I'd end up staying here for ten whole months? Even if I move to Rue Saint-Michel, I'll often think of that cozy little bar downstairs. I'll reminisce about the absinthe that could both sober me up and make me intoxicated, the pungent smell of sulfur, those pesky bedbugs, and the people who brought light to my darkness. Miss Séraphine, Charlie, and... you."
As Gabriel spoke, he paused, extending his hand to touch the crack in the wall where a fallen newspaper had revealed it.
Lumian couldn't resist a playful jab, "Do you authors enjoy launching into spontaneous soliloquies and lengthy speeches?"
Gabriel chuckled sheepishly and replied, "I don't know about other authors, but I do find myself doing it occasionally.
"I've called this place home for nearly a year, and I've witnessed numerous tenants abruptly vanish, leave in haste, or succumb to the pain of life. Yet, the very next day, or maybe just an hour later, new tenants move into the very rooms left behind by those chasing prosperity and dreams in Trier. Most of them fail and fade away like dust, but waves of people keep coming. Perhaps one or two among them will actually succeed.
"This is the wellspring of inspiration for the 'Lightseeker' script."
"You're the one who succeeded." Lumian couldn't help but recall Madame Michel, who had tragically ended her life while singing "In the Capital of Joy, forever Trier," a memory that left him with no capacity for mocking Gabriel.
"Hope." Gabriel's face lit up with anticipation.
He took another step toward the second floor, as if driven to continue ascending.
"Where are you going?" Lumian could guess the answer, yet he asked politely.
Gabriel motioned upstairs.
"To bid farewell to Miss Séraphine and express my gratitude for her unwavering support."
Lumian couldn't resist a sly smile, pursing his lips and letting out

a playful whistle. "Have a romantic night!"
"I am not!" Gabriel instinctively protested.
Lumian turned and headed towards Room 207, waving his hand dismissively.
"Can't a person have a romantic night all to themselves?"
Gabriel was speechless.
After witnessing Ciel's entrance into the room, Gabriel cleared his throat and continued his ascent to the third floor.
As he climbed, memories flooded his mind—the initial encounter with the human model, Séraphine, their first conversation about his creation, and the first words of encouragement...
He understood that human modeling was a meagerly compensated profession. Even the most popular male models barely received 80 to 90 verl d'or a month. Ordinary models scraped by on 60 to 70, equivalent to the earnings of an apprentice motel attendant. Female models fared even worse, with a meager 40 verl d'or, forcing them to take on part-time work. No one chose to expose their bodies as artists' models out of laziness or greed for pleasure.
Séraphine was no exception. She endured the criticism to earn more money and improve her circumstances.
Gabriel halted outside Room 309 and rapped gently on the door.
"Please come in." Séraphine's somewhat hollow voice responded.
Gabriel pushed the door open and found Séraphine standing by the wooden table near the window. Her lake-blue dress had slipped from her form and lay in a heap on the floor.
In the crimson moonlight, Séraphine's brown eyes flickered, and her brown hair cascaded down her back. Her fair body bore the imprint of human faces.
Some were stunning, some sinister, some handsome, and some wicked. They all fixed their gaze on Gabriel simultaneously.
Gabriel nearly let out a startled cry.
"What's the matter?" Séraphine's voice, tinged with detachment, rang out once more.
Gabriel shook off his stupor and realized that the faces were nothing more than lifelike oil paintings. The canvas was Séraphine's body.
Remembering that she was a human model, Gabriel refrained from probing further. He exhaled and expressed, "I'm moving out tomorrow. Thank you for your encouragement these past few months."
As soon as he finished speaking, Séraphine extended her right hand, her eyes distant.
Gabriel couldn't resist complying.

Half an hour later, Gabriel lay on the bed, holding Séraphine close, and spoke with sincerity, "Come with me to Rue Saint-Michel."
Séraphine shook her head resolutely. "I'm moving as well. Somewhere else."
Gabriel persisted, "Where to?"
"To a place called the Hostel. My friends are there." Séraphine's voice turned hollow once more.
Gabriel made several attempts to convince her, but the human model remained steadfast.
He had no choice but to leave disheartened. Séraphine rose from the bed, entirely unclothed, and watched him as he walked towards the door.
In that instant, the crimson moon was veiled, plunging the room into an unnatural darkness. The oil-painted faces on Séraphine's body suddenly appeared to come alive, their mouths opening as Gabriel retreated.
Eventually, tranquility returned, and Gabriel respectfully closed the door.
...
The following morning, Lumian stuck to his routine—going for a run, practicing his boxing, and hunting for breakfast in his customary fashion.
Upon his return to the Auberge du Coq Doré, he noticed that Gabriel's neighboring room was already open. There was no sign of Gabriel, nor any trace of luggage.
Intrigued, Lumian made his way to the third floor and discovered that Room 309 was in the same state.
He clicked his tongue and returned to Room 207 with a wry smile.
Before long, the "doll" messenger made an appearance, tossing a neatly folded letter and a silver mask onto the wooden table.
Madam Justice's reward has arrived? Lumian's delight was palpable.

Chapter 362: Lie

Lumian hesitated briefly before touching the silver mask. He carefully opened the letter and began to read the elegant handwriting, which was quite different from Madam Magician's.

"This is the promised reward.

"Lie:

"It allows you to truly transform your appearance, adjusting your form within a certain range, and altering your height.

"At the same time, it grants you the ability to use Flame Controlling and Damage Transfer like a Magician. You'll also have an enhanced sense of danger, as well as improved balance and agility.

"It can change its appearance at will. It can become anything you desire.

"But, when you wear it, your emotions will be amplified. You must learn to control yourself, or there will be significant problems.

"Also, remember:

"Don't lose yourself in Lie."

It's actually portable without any negative effects? Lumian's initial reaction after reading the letter wasn't one of delight that Lie's effects suited his needs but rather one of surprise that the mystical item's negative effects were far weaker than he had imagined.

It only amplified one's emotions when worn!

In other words, Lumian could store it in a bag, wallet, or any other container and carry it with him at all times without facing any side effects.

Compared to Lie, Decency had to be ensconced in liquor, making it rather troublesome to retrieve and safeguard. Flog also exerted an influence while being carried.

With a sigh, Lumian couldn't help but make a self-deprecating remark.

Why does it always have to be something that messes with my emotions?

With this combination, even Alms Monk would explode on the spot...

This combination of dark corruption from the contracted creatures, the fluctuations in desire stemming from Flog, and the "gift" bestowed by the Blood Emperor Alista Tudor was sure to wreak havoc on his emotions. When you added Lie to the mix, the equation became something like 1+1+1+1>4.

Having just finished psychiatric treatment for his past wounds and painful memories and returning to his normal state, Lumian realized that if he wanted to avoid descending into madness and

losing control, he shouldn't let Flog's boxing gloves and Lie take effect simultaneously.
Lie is meant for the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society gatherings. It's for socializing; I don't need Flog for that. And when I'm not using Lie, I have the Niese Face to replace it, Lumian thought, pondering for a moment before tossing the satchel containing the Flog boxing gloves onto the bed.
After this decision, he reached for the silver Lie mask and covered his face.
The mask began to melt, its silvery substance seeping into Lumian's skin like mercury, completely enveloping his head.
In an instant, everything began to shift and transform. Lumian's contours and facial features swiftly adjusted.
Before long, the silvery liquid seemed to be absorbed or evaporated, and Lumian's skin returned to normal, now even fairer than before.
Then, his body underwent a sudden change, and his white shirt strained against his bulging chest.
Lumian lowered his head and scrutinized his appearance for a few seconds before muttering to himself, There's a limit of 10 centimeters for becoming shorter or taller...
I used to be 1.76 meters tall, just 8 centimeters taller than Aurore, but now I'm 1.81 meters tall. Yes, three centimeters of difference shouldn't be noticeable to ordinary people. Besides, it is quite normal for both men and women to use special shoes to appear taller...
I can even imitate voices. That's all part of the true transformation of one's appearance...
With his loose pants and a snug shirt, Lumian left Room 207 and entered the washroom, casting his gaze at the mirror.
A beautiful woman stared back at him in the mirror. She had long, thick blond hair, light-blue eyes, a tall, delicate nose, and red lips as bright as the morning sun.
The details of her facial features and the contours of her face continued to subtly change for dozens of seconds before settling into their final form.
Lumian gazed at the woman in the mirror, his eyes gradually softening as the corners of his mouth curled up.
After a few seconds, he chuckled and said, "Long time no see, Aurore."
...
Franca, returning from Rue des Fontaines, gracefully opened the door to Apartment 601.
What she saw when she entered left her stunned—a face identical

to her own.
This person had a flaxen ponytail, bright, smiling lake-colored eyes, brown eyebrows that reached her temples, and thin red lips...
Franca's tension was palpable as she blurted out, "Who are you? Why are you impersonating me?"
The doppelganger also pointed at her and said, "Who are you? Why are you impersonating me?"
In exasperation, Franca laughed and secretly wrapped the spider silk she released around the imposter.
In an instant, crimson flames erupted, igniting the invisible threads around them.
Franca immediately understood the truth. She pointed at the fake Franca and said, "You Six-Eared Macaque, how dare you impersonate me!"
The fake Franca's face squirmed as she transformed back into Lumian.
His body grew taller.
After removing the Lie earring, Lumian asked curiously, "What's a six-eared macaque?"
Franca hesitated for a moment, debating whether to keep it a secret, but then she realized that Lumian already knew everything he needed to know. There was no need to hide such trivial details.
She replied, "Back home, there are many myths and legends for your sister and me. The Six-Eared Macaque is one of them. It can hear all your secrets and become identical to you."
Without waiting for Lumian's response, Franca asked excitedly, "Did you acquire a mystical item that can alter your appearance and figure?"
Lumian raised his left hand, wrapped in a few white bandages, and replied, "Can't you see I'm injured? I accepted Madam Justice's commission and helped her retrieve an object from the fourth level of the catacombs. This is the reward: Lie."
As he spoke, Lumian flicked the earring-shaped mystical item with his right hand.
"Is that so?" Franca had suspected that Lumian's visit to the catacombs was likely arranged by the Tarot Club, so she hadn't inquired further in front of Jenna.
Curious, she asked, "What was the object?"
Lumian pondered for a moment and realized that neither Madam Magician, Madam Justice, nor Madame Hela had asked him to keep it a secret. Hence, he replied, "The spring water of the Samaritan Women's Spring."
"Is there really a Samaritan Women's Spring?" Franca was

astonished.
She had read Trier's mysticism magazines and heard rumors about the Samaritan Women's Spring. She even went to the catacombs to find the one named by the administrators but found nothing magical.
"Yes," Lumian confirmed after some thought. "It's deep in the catacombs and has something to do with Fourth Epoch Trier."
Franca's eyes sparkled as she inquired, "Is it magical?"
Lumian glanced at her.
"It's magical, but it's only for Beyonders of the Corpse Collector, Warrior, and Sleepless pathways. If you want to give it a try, there's only one outcome. You'll forget who you were and the home you keep talking about. From then on, you'll become a true Trier Demoness."
Franca shuddered and subconsciously shook her head.
"What's the difference between that and being dead?"
She stopped asking about the Samaritan Women's Spring and said excitedly, "Can you transform into Muggle? Let me take a look."
Lumian gazed at Franca for a few seconds before finally donning the silver-white earring again.
Soon, Aurore, clad in a white shirt, black vest, and simple pants, appeared before Franca.
"Wow!" Franca exclaimed. "She's even more beautiful than I imagined!"
"Is that the point?" Lumian asked in Aurore's voice.
Franca smiled sheepishly.
"I'm not sure how close this is to the real Muggle, but we disguise ourselves at gatherings. This is enough."
Lumian reverted to his original form. As he removed the Lie earring, he said,
"I've already written a letter to Madam Hela. She said she'll inform me about the next gathering and bring me there."
Franca averted her gaze in disappointment.
"Then there's no need for me to worry. Yes, let me tell you about the different methods of the gathering and the characteristics of the members of the Research Society..."
Franca's supplementary class continued until noon.
Seeing Lumian preparing to leave, she hesitated for a moment and said, "Um, can you... can you transform into me again?"
Lumian, puzzled but not refusing, frowned.
Before long, with a reference, he accurately transformed into another Franca.
Franca gazed at her face, seemingly intoxicated.
Suddenly, she extended her right hand and touched Lumian's

cheek.
"Hey!" Lumian took a step back.
Franca snapped out of her daze and smiled sheepishly.
"The feeling of a real person and a mirror is indeed different. However, I feel that you're still lacking something, but I can't tell what."
Lumian pondered for a moment and asked with a smile, "Lacking a feminine charm?"
"Maybe." Franca exhaled and watched Lumian walk towards the door.
Just as Lumian opened the door, he heard the Demoness of Pleasure shout from behind, "Dammit, were you secretly cursing me? What feminine charm!"
...
In Salle de Bal Brise, as Lumian sat down, Sarkota approached him with a wanted poster and said,
"Those black dogs have been asking around with it for the past two days."
Lumian glanced at it and realized it was his wanted poster.
He smiled nonchalantly. "It's fine. Let them search."
Sarkota didn't say anything else and informed Lumian, "The Boss wants you to make a trip to Rue des Fontaines today."
What's the matter now? Lumian pondered and nodded.
It was almost evening when he arrived at 11 Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.
The lawn seemed to have been ravaged, and the hall filled with weapons and armor was severely damaged.
Upon seeing Gardner Martin, Lumian didn't hide his confusion.
"Did something happen?"
Gardner Martin, his face glowing, smiled and said, "After the Werewolf incident, they launched a sneak attack and were forced back. They suffered a loss."
The Rose School of Thought ultimately fell into the Boss's trap?
Seeing that Gardner Martin didn't want to elaborate, Lumian asked, "Boss, why did you summon me?"
Gardner Martin produced an exquisite invitation.
"Count Poufer invites you to his Red Swan Castle for a salon this weekend."
Red Swan Castle? Lumian frowned slightly.

Chapter 363: Studying Leads to Improvement

Lumian still vividly recalled the night he played King's Pie. Nightmares haunted him repeatedly, and every time, he found himself in an ancient beige castle, its surface tainted with the marks of ages-old blood, its interior a horrifying canvas of madness.

Seeing his silence, Gardner Martin flashed a reassuring smile.

"Just remember to let Poufer choose first in situations like the King's Pie game, and you'll be fine."

But I'm no longer the same person I used to be. Can I really depend on being the last to choose to avoid the problem when there's the Blood Emperor's aura corrupting my right hand? Lumian silently pondered for a moment before responding, "Yes, Commanding Officer."

He then inquired, "Where is Red Swan Castle?"

He intended to scout the area when the opportunity arose. At the very least, he needed to pinpoint the location of the nearest cathedral.

"Quartier Éraste, near Emperor Roselle's Summer Palace and the West Lognes Forest," Gardner Martin replied succinctly.

Quartier Éraste was designated as 17. In Roselle's time, it served as a suburban retreat for nobles and royalty, but now it was enclosed within the city walls, becoming one of Trier's largest districts. Known as the barracks district due to its multiple army encampments, it was situated in the northwest, boasting a national park, West Lognes Forest, a conference center, and numerous arsenals. Additionally, it was home to the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun's largest cloister in Trier, the Sacred Heart Cloister.

Lumian recalled a map of Trier he had seen and nodded in acknowledgment.

"It's near the square district."

Emperor Roselle's summer palace wasn't situated in Quartier Éraste; it resided in the square district, nestled between West and East Lognes Forest.

Gardner Martin cast a glance at Lumian's left hand.

"Why are you injured?"

Lumian smiled candidly and said, "I recently delved into the catacombs with a friend I met at a mysticism gathering and got injured."

He couldn't shake the feeling that the Iron and Blood Cross Order had an interest in the underground world, possibly with spies lurking around the tombs. It was safer to focus the lie on

something else. The Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society also doubled as a mysticism gathering, after all.
Gardner Martin nodded with approval.
"Avoid unnecessary explorations and risks in the future. They won't bring you the mystical knowledge you seek, nor will they yield valuable items. Only danger, danger, and more danger awaits."
Is that so? Does the Samaritan Women's Spring count as a high-value item? Lumian inwardly criticized. Nevertheless, he earnestly agreed,"Yes, Commanding Officer."
Had it not been for Madam Justice's request, he would have had no inclination to venture into the catacombs' fourth level.
Now, the odds drew closer to zero. He couldn't help but wonder if he might stumble upon another of Amon's tombs!
After bidding farewell to Gardner Martin, Lumian hopped onto a public carriage headed back to Avenue du Marché.
As the carriage rumbled along, he leaned against the wall, letting various thoughts swirl through his mind. He used this time to relax and ponder any potential issues he might have overlooked.
Amidst the rhythmic sounds of horses' hooves and the carriage's wheels, a sudden thought struck Lumian.
Could the Rose School of Thought, after suffering another setback at the hands of Gardner Martin, decide to seek out others who were involved in the Tree of Shadow incident?
The Bliss Society only lost Charlotte Calvino and Susanna Mattise, the high priestess. There are still other members to contend with, such as Maipú Meyer, the former manager of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, or the actresses who had once played lead roles there before departing.
I wonder if Susanna Mattise had divulged the details of the Tree of Shadow to these members. If she had, they would likely know that the high priestess's true target was either me, Ciel Dubois, or rather, Lumian Lee...
If that were the case, the Rose School of Thought and the Bliss Society might redirect their focus towards me. That could spell trouble...
How annoying. I really wish I could eliminate every member of the Rose School of Thought and the Bliss Society...
Towards the end, upon realizing the various negative effects on him, Lumian cursed inwardly before controlling himself.
If it weren't for the Actors' remarkable skill in disguise and concealing themselves, he might have seriously contemplated eliminating all members of the Bliss Society to eliminate any hidden threats.

He suspected that the Flog boxing gloves might have a miraculous effect on individuals with twisted desires, like those in the Bliss Society.
How should I find them? Lumian fell into deep thought.
Just then, as the public carriage pulled into a halfway stop, a passenger boarded.
It was a boy, around seven or eight years old, dressed in a white shirt and a miniature black formal suit with matching shorts. He wore white socks and black shoes, had short blond hair, and his brown eyes held determination. His chubby cheeks suggested he still had traces of baby fat.
Oh, isn't this Baron Brignais's godson, Ludwig? Lumian's mood brightened as he smiled.
Almost simultaneously, Ludwig noticed him
and his expression turned to panic. He swiftly attempted to disembark from the carriage.
He was still carrying the heavy dark-red hard school bag.
Running away from home again? Lumian thought as he stood up, alighting from the carriage ahead of schedule.
The boy had already disappeared from the vicinity of the stop sign.
He's quite fast... Lumian identified the nearby footprints and calmly chose a direction.
Escaping a Hunter's pursuit without addressing tracks promptly was nearly impossible.
After trailing the footprints for a couple of streets, Lumian turned into a secluded alley and approached a half-broken barricade that barely reached waist height. He couldn't help but chuckle as he said, "Come out."
Ludwig cautiously peeked his young face out from behind the barricade, a mixture of nervousness and resentment evident in his voice as he said, "You swindler, stay away! If you come any closer, I-I'll devour you!"
Lumian raised his right hand and stroked his chin thoughtfully.
"Why did you run away from home again?"
Ludwig responded angrily, "It's all because of all that damn homework!"
Lumian couldn't help but tease, "Yo, you've learned to curse. You've improved since last time."
He noted that Ludwig, even if his unusual appetite and eating habits were disregarded, seemed more like a real child now compared to their previous encounter.
With this in mind, Lumian concluded, "This proves that studying is still useful."
Ludwig was momentarily taken aback and seemed to forget to

retort.
Lumian sized him up and said sincerely, "You weren't born with a high IQ; in a way, you're relatively less intelligent. But if you don't study, do your homework regularly, and occasionally take exams to gradually improve your thinking abilities, I can guarantee that someone like me could easily deceive you the moment you step outside, and you wouldn't even realize how you fell for it."
Ludwig muttered to himself in a daze, "Did I really improve? Is studying, doing homework, and taking exams really useful..."
You're not born stupid, are you? *Is your brain damaged?* You believed me just like that? I can't even imagine what would happen to you if you were thrown at the Salle de Bal Unique's entrance... As Lumian muttered inwardly, his smile remained unwavering.
"That's right. If you find it too burdensome, talk to Brignais about reducing the amount of homework. There's no need to run away from home. Giving up on studying will only make you more foolish."
At that moment, Lumian had a single prevailing thought:
It is better to keep such abnormal and brainless humans or humanoid creatures under the supervision of the orthodox Church. However, wouldn't the Church of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom be too arrogant to think that Baron Brignais could control a fellow who ate everything he saw?
He has already escaped twice!
If he hadn't encountered me every time, he would have caused trouble long ago!
Ludwig fell silent for a few seconds before he spoke up, "Will you negotiate for me?"
Lumian didn't hesitate in his response, "No problem."
Negotiating was something he was quite experienced in, especially when dealing with his sister.
"Then I'll trust you again." Ludwig hesitated for a moment before making up his mind.
He then flipped over the dilapidated barricade.
Don't say that. It'll only make me feel like scamming you again... Lumian muttered and led Ludwig to the nearest public carriage stop.
On the way, he glanced at the boy's filthy clothes and said, "Did you bring a change of clothes?"
"No." Ludwig shook his head.
Running away from home without any spare clothes? Lumian asked in amusement, "So, what's in your bag? Food?"
Again, Ludwig shook his head, displaying a rather obedient

attitude.
It's not food or clothes... Lumian cast a puzzled glance at the dark-red hard school bag.
"It can't be filled with books and papers, can it?"
"No either..." Ludwig suddenly shut his mouth.
What could it be? Lumian narrowed his eyes.
At that moment, Ludwig asked innocently, "Is there anything to eat?"
"No, we'll eat when we return to Avenue du Marché," Lumian replied mercilessly.
What a joke. With your appetite, why would I use my own money to treat you?
Disappointed, Ludwig let out a sigh and began sucking his finger, as if he wanted to take a bite out of it.
Fortunately, their destination, Avenue du Marché, wasn't too far away. After another stop, they arrived, and Lumian spotted Baron Brignais waiting at the entrance of the usury company. The gentleman visibly relaxed upon seeing Ludwig.
"This can't go on," Lumian interjected before the other party could speak. "Do you think I'll keep running into him every time? Reduce his homework by half."
Baron Brignais weighed the options for a moment. "Okay."
Ludwig interjected in a hushed tone, "And add another dessert meal."
With the godfather and godchild relationship seemingly back to normal, Lumian bid them farewell and couldn't help but wonder, Why did the Church of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom send such an abnormal child to Trier?
...
In the hill district, in Deep Valley Town, in front of an old grayish-white house with only two floors, Valentine and Imre, now in possession of the brass key obtained from Celia Bello, stood behind the Deacon Angoulême with serious expressions.
According to the feedback from a Sealed Artifact, the brass key left behind by the mysterious entrustee of the gatekeeper's disappearance pointed to this very building.

Chapter 364: Red House

The door to the grayish-white old house creaked open, needing no key to grant access.

Inside, chaos reigned, with assorted items strewn about, as if someone had burglarized the place.

Valentine surveyed the disarray and remarked, "Someone's made off with valuable items from here."

His gaze fell upon the open and empty doors to the first-floor rooms, evidence of heavy boxes that once occupied the space.

"We're too late. The entrustee's companion must have sensed trouble and moved out," Imre lamented.

The Purifiers fanned out, scouring the cramped area for clues.

Before long, Angoulême discovered a handful of white papers scattered near the stairwell's edge. He carefully examined them in the sunlight.

Taking a pencil from his pocket, he began to gently shade one of the papers.

Gradually, faint marks emerged, forming a few legible words: "Albert Goncourt... Underground... Riot... Time..."

"Albert Goncourt..." Imre glanced at the paper in the deacon's hand and couldn't help but frown.

Albert Goncourt had been the mastermind behind the Trier uprising six years ago, a leader of the Carbonari—a prominent anti-government militant faction.

Angoulême remained silent, urging his team to press on with their investigation.

After thoroughly searching both the first and second floors, they descended into the cellar.

At the far end stood a black iron door, its brass lock gleaming in the dim light.

Angoulême patted the grayish-white humanoid machine by his side and inserted the brass key he had obtained from Celia Bello into its palm.

Immediately after, Angoulême adjusted a few knobs on the mechanical contraption.

From the high-energy pyrokinetic backpack on the robot's back, a billowing white mist erupted. Steadily, it pushed the rigid machine forward, guiding the brass key into the lock at the correct height.

Watching this spectacle, Imre couldn't help but sigh, "Deacon, among the Inquisition—no, the entire Church—you're truly the most fond of mechanical creations."

Angoulême glanced at his usually laid-back subordinate and replied, "I don't discriminate, whether it's a product of the Church

of the God of Steam and Machinery or not. I only care about its utility.
"When a robot malfunctions, we can fix or replace it. If a person breaks down, I'll be dealing with compensation claims and grieving friends and families."
The Purifiers recognized the deacon's protective tone and turned their attention to the grayish-white humanoid machine with a smile.
Currently, it could only be used to move things and hammer nails. It could barely walk and run. It couldn't do any intricate or brain-intensive operations, and it didn't last long enough. Otherwise, it would have saved them a lot of trouble.
With a mechanical click, the robot turned the brass key, and the heavy iron door swung open.
A thin fog billowed from within, distorting the door and revealing ethereal faces, etched in the mist, contorted with hatred and pain.
The faces were formed by white fog, filled with hatred and pain.
They clawed and cursed at the mechanical creation opening the door, but it remained impassive.
Rays of brilliant sunlight descended one after another, swiftly clearing the fog behind the black iron door.
As the fog dissipated, Valentine and the others saw what was there.
It was a small altar, made of grayish-black stones, rising only halfway up.
Angoulême, after repeated confirmations that the area was safe, guided the robot inside.
He observed a shallow, narrow groove on top of the grayish-black altar, suggesting that something had once been embedded there but was now gone.
"A ring?" Angoulême mused in a hushed tone.
...
In the market district, at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, at the entrance of Apartment 601.
Franca sported an exquisite shirt adorned with lace flowers at the collar and cuffs, paired with her beloved beige breeches under the sunlight. Her slippers completed the ensemble as she gazed at Lumian. Franca questioned, "Why are you here again?"
Not wasting any time for his response, she raised her hand and quipped, "If you transform into Muggle, you're more than welcome!"
Lumian pushed his way into the room and scanned his surroundings.
"I need to discuss something with you."

"What's the matter now?" Franca, visibly apprehensive, inquired, "Can't you wait patiently for the gathering next week?"
Lumian chuckled.
"How about a trip to Trocadéro, specifically the Red House Café?"
"The Red House Café known for hosting women's orgies?" Franca asked in surprise.
Oh, you remembered it immediately. You must have been thinking about it a lot, right? Lumian replied with a smile, "Yes."
Franca shook her head.
"Forget it, forget it. Fantasizing about it is enough. No need to actually go. It would be too indulgent. I must maintain control, resist desires, and avoid complete indulgence."
Then, she scrutinized Lumian and remarked critically, "Don't tell me you intend to use Lie and Transfiguration to disguise yourself as a woman and infiltrate the orgy for firsthand experience?"
Lumian mocked, "Did you truly think that through, leading you to believe I'd consider such a plan? This is a serious matter!"
He recounted the Rose School of Thought's failure and his concerns.
"Someone from the Bliss Society mentioned that they're in contact with members of the Moment Society and the Narcissus Society, who also participate in the Red House female orgies. They want to convert them into believers of the Mother Tree of Desire.
"If we follow this trail, we might uncover the core members of the Bliss Society, or at least eliminate Maipú Meyer and those who were aware of Susanna Mattise's rough plan."
Franca nodded slightly and said, "Moreover, we can't entrust this to official Beyonders. If they extract any information, your cover could be blown."
With a resolute expression, she declared, "Since it's a serious matter, we have to be there."
Then, with enthusiasm, she asked, "When are you planning to go? Do you know the party's time and the conditions for an invitation?"
"That's today's objective. Visit the Red House Café, enjoy coffee for an hour or two while subtly displaying your feminine charm. See if you attract the attention of potential contacts among the homosexuals or identify any women who might be orgy participants. Initiate conversations and establish connections to gather further intelligence." Lumian understood the importance of a methodical approach, especially in delicate situations like this one.
Franca nodded heavily.
"No problem."

Lumian produced Lie, in the shape of a silver necklace, and handed it to Franca.
"Use this to alter your hair, eyes, and facial features. You can't appear in your true form. What if Maipú Meyer is lurking? He'd recognize you as the current boss of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons in an instant!"
As soon as Franca finished donning Lie, she said eagerly, "Let's go now!"
Lumian's lips curled up.
"I forgot to mention that this mystical item amplifies the wearer's emotions."
"Uh..." Franca was taken aback. "No wonder I've been feeling so anxious!"
Lumian added with a smile, "Emotions that weren't there before won't be amplified."
"..."Franca, clenching her teeth, retorted, "Well, my desire to punch you has definitely been amplified."
Lumian ceased his mockery and began to earnestly explain the functions and precautions of Lie.
Franca walked to the full-body mirror and observed her hair rapidly turning black, her pupils turning dark brown, her skin becoming more delicate, and her lines softer.
Compared to her flamboyant beauty, she now appeared more composed and mature. Her facial features leaned towards elegance, giving her an indescribable charm.
Gazing at her altered reflection in the mirror, Franca remained silent for a prolonged moment.
"It doesn't resemble your true appearance, but it's still beautiful and charming," Lumian complimented objectively.
He wanted to say that she had the charm of a Demoness, but he chose not to agitate Franca.
Franca snapped out of her daze and silently changed into non-red boots before walking towards the door.
Upon entering the corridor, she snapped out of her daze and glanced at Lumian beside her.
"If you're giving me Lie, how do you plan to disguise yourself as a woman? Are you relying on the transformation illusion?"
Lumian replied with a hint of amusement, "Who says I'm masquerading as a woman?"
He led Franca to a new safe house on Rue du Rossignol, retrieved a brownish-yellow ritualistic dog skin, and wrapped it around himself.
Then, he recited an incantation in Hermes.
"Dog!"

A dark light suddenly surged from the ritualistic dog skin, enveloping Lumian completely.
In an instant, a large dog with brownish-yellow fur appeared in the room.
Franca, with her black hair and brown eyes, was taken aback.
She finally understood Lumian's plan for monitoring the situation at the Red House Café.
After a moment of curiosity, Franca asked, "What does it feel like to become a big dog? Are you sure you don't feel burdened?"
The brownish-yellow-furred dog rolled its eyes at Franca and opened its mouth. "Woof!"
Are you stupid? Do you think dogs can speak and answer your questions?
Franca clicked her tongue and, with Lumian in brownish-yellow dog form, hired a rental carriage to head to Trocadéro Town, west of Lavigny Docks.
Along the way, Lumian had the urge to bite her several times. From time to time, she would curiously stroked his dog fur, stomach, and head, hoping to find something distinct from a real dog.
After more than an hour, the carriage arrived outside Trocadéro.
Franca paid the fare of 2 verl d'or, and Lumian, in his dog guise, hopped out, behaving as if he had no connection to her. He began to scout the streets for the Red House Café, which emitted a distinctive aroma of fermented grapes.
Soon, he located the establishment near East Lognes Forest.
While the entire building wasn't red, it sported a magnificent mushroom-shaped red roof. The main structure was beige, adorned with bold graffiti on the walls.
Lumian settled near the café's entrance, lying down quietly, and watched as Franca, transformed into a black-haired beauty, entered the establishment.

Chapter 365: Observation

The ambiance at the Red House Café radiated a small-town charm. Enamelware utensils, wooden-framed decorative paintings, checkered tablecloths, and exposed ceiling beams gave it a simple yet elegant vibe, a striking contrast to its vibrant and trendy exterior.

Franca, seated by the window, ordered a cup of fragrant Intis coffee and basked in the sunlight.

With a casual glance around, she observed the clientele and waitstaff.

Most of them were women, particularly the waitresses, and their attire and graceful movements indicated specialized training.

Only two men, seemingly foreign wine merchants, sat across from each other, discussing the impact of this year's abundant rain and sunlight on grape quality. Among the three female patrons, one was a local elderly woman with gray hair, dressed modestly, occasionally greeting passersby. Another was in her thirties, wearing a veiled black hat and a blue corset dress, her features fairly ordinary. The third, a striking beauty with delicate eyebrows, had naturally cascading brown hair in wavy curls, dressed simply, and exuded a calm demeanor.

Apart from the local elderly lady, the other two might be participants in the orgies. Franca turned her attention away, thinking that the first floor, with a dozen or so tables, didn't seem like the place for such private affairs.

Her guess was that it might be happening in the basement or on an upper floor closer to the distinctive red mushroom roof.

From Franca's vantage point, she had a clear view of the café's entrance. Lumian, in his brownish-yellow dog form, lay there quietly, soaking up the sun and keeping a close eye on everyone entering and exiting the Red House Café, as well as the patrons and waitresses inside.

No one paid much attention to the wild dog by the roadside, except for a few stray dogs that passed by.

One of them bared its teeth at Lumian, who occupied his usual spot, and growled menacingly.

Lumian felt somewhat helpless. *Could he really engage in a dogfight in his current form?*

This wasn't a significant concern for him, but what mattered was that the Animal Creation Spell had sealed most of his Beyonder powers, reducing his strength to that of a dog.

Of course, given his size as a large dog, intimidating smaller canines was a breeze. However, the dog growling at him was also

quite substantial, albeit on the thin side.
Fight! Fight! Franca couldn't contain her excitement as she watched the scene unfold through the window.
She had no intention of intervening; it was a rare opportunity to witness Lumian in such an awkward situation. *How could she resist the spectacle?*
Lumian, sprawled by the door, raised his right palm—no, his right foreleg. Drawing from past experiences, he focused a portion of his consciousness on his paw.
A faint sense of madness and a scent of blood, perceptible only to Lumian, hung in the air.
The brown-furred dog, its skeletal frame visible, was taken aback and hastily retreated with its tail between its legs.
Oh... Come on! Be more daring! *Why run away?* Franca, inside the Red House Café, was left disappointed.
She couldn't fathom why the dog had suddenly become afraid of Lumian.
The Hunter couldn't unleash his full powers—he could exude an aura of provocation at best!
Simultaneously, Lumian chuckled self-deprecatingly.
If The Blood Emperor ever found out that I used His aura to scare off dogs, He might just skin me alive, wouldn't He?
After the brief interlude, Franca refocused her attention on the café.
Drawing from her experience and observations in fashion magazines, she gracefully sipped her coffee and occasionally performed everyday actions that highlighted her feminine charm, all learned over the past year.
It didn't escape her notice that nearly everyone in the café had their eyes on her. Some glanced discreetly, while others openly admired her, some even offering warm smiles.
The elderly local lady, who had been seated nearby, smiled at Franca, picked up honey-roasted chicken wings from her plate, and made her way out of the Red House Café.
Stopping in front of Lumian, she mumbled to herself in amazement, "It's another one..."
Lumian had an uneasy feeling as he watched the old lady squat down and offer the brownish-yellow roasted chicken wing to him.
After a moment's hesitation, he bit into the chicken wing like a real dog, allowing the old lady to stroke his furry head.
Truth be told, he wasn't accustomed to eating like a dog, but fortunately, the old lady stood up and departed after a couple of affectionate strokes.
Inside the Red House Café, Franca couldn't help but burst into

laughter as she watched Lumian awkwardly nibble at the chicken wings. Unable to resist her amplified emotions, her body trembled with laughter.
If she didn't need to maintain her image, she might have doubled over in laughter.
She also wanted to take something to feed Lumian!
In her natural state, Franca's true charisma shone through. Her black hair, brown eyes, and effortless elegance captivated those around her, giving her a unique and magnetic presence in the café.
The mysterious charm of her black hair and brown eyes, along with her elegant and casual demeanor, made her uniquely attractive.
At that moment, a woman wearing a light-colored hunting suit rode up on a brown horse from the nearby racetrack near East Lognes Forest.
She skillfully dismounted and removed her hat.
Her long, orange-red hair flowed like a waterfall, adding a touch of wildness to her otherwise clean, pure, and exquisite face.
Carrying a whip, the woman in the hunting attire secured her horse and made her way into the Red House Café. She approached the quiet and beautiful young woman.
Franca had ceased her laughter at Lumian's antics and couldn't help but feel that this new arrival seemed more like a participant in the orgies than anyone else present.
Despite being the most beautiful with exquisitely delicate features that gave her an innocent appearance, there was an aura about her that could easily pass for that of a man.
There was likely to be someone like her at a female orgy.
Franca elegantly raised her right hand and brushed back the black hair that had fallen across her lips, subtly displaying her own feminine charm.
The woman with long orange-red hair, who had been unconsciously surveying the café's occupants, appeared visibly taken aback, as if she had been momentarily stunned.
However, Lumian, who had been lying quietly by the entrance, noticed a slight furrow in the woman's brow after her initial surprise.
She averted her gaze and continued her approach toward the quietly elegant woman with wavy hair. They engaged in light banter before they ascended the wooden stairs to the second floor amidst some chatter.
Franca observed them from the corner of her eye and began to form a rough idea.
There is a strong likelihood that these two are indeed participants

in the female orgies, though whether they belonged to the Moment Society or the Narcissus Society remains uncertain.
Franca continued to sip her coffee leisurely, deliberately making no move.
After more than half an hour had passed, and with no sign of the women descending, she decided to leave her seat and walked out of Red House Café.
She planned to call it a day, so as to not risk arousing suspicion by approaching them too hastily.
Her plan was to maintain her cover as a resident of the nearby Lavigny Docks and return to Trocadéro every two or three days, or even more frequently. After all, this area was renowned for its wine production and scenic beauty, attracting numerous tourists daily. It would be entirely plausible for a lady who had recently moved nearby to explore the area.
Lumian, stationed at the entrance of the Red House Café, appeared disinterested, as though he had no connection to Franca's actions.
Almost simultaneously, his sharp senses detected the beautiful woman with long orange-red hair standing behind a glass window on the second floor.
The woman observed Franca's departing figure with a solemn, vigilant, and contemplative expression, devoid of any apparent homosexual romantic interest.
Why is there such a reaction? Did she discover something amiss with Franca? *How did she discover it?* Lumian felt puzzled as he stood up, as if he had soaked up enough sun, and moved to the alley between the Red House Café and the neighboring building, which was closer to Franca's departure direction.
Before long, the woman with long orange-red hair reappeared behind the second-floor window.
She carefully scanned her surroundings, confirming that no one was paying attention. There was only a brownish-yellow dog dozing off in a corner. Gently, she pushed open the window and gracefully descended to the alley below, as light as a feather.
Immediately after her descent, the woman with the clean and pure appearance blended into the shadows.
Lumian, pretending to be in a state of drowsiness, silently observed this unfolding scene, his mind racing.
Featherfall... Shadow Concealment... Beauty... Remarkable charisma... *Could she be a Demoness?*
Was it precisely because she is also a Demoness that she sensed something unusual about Franca's appearance and demeanor, prompting her to follow and observe?
Lumian discreetly stood up and began to follow Franca from a

distance, giving the appearance of a leisurely stroll.
The orange-red-haired woman remained hidden in the shadows, elusive and difficult to pinpoint. Lumian couldn't ascertain her exact location, but he was certain that she was not far from Franca.
Franca, playing her part convincingly, didn't seem in a hurry to leave Trocadéro. She embraced the role of a tourist, visiting the nearest vineyard, sampling the free red wine at a shop, and purchasing some regional specialties.
Just before noon, Franca entered the town's upscale department store and began trying on various styles of women's clothing.
As Lumian watched, nearly fifteen minutes later, he lost sight of Franca. It was then that he observed the clean-looking woman in hunting attire emerging from the shadows in a corner of the department store, her eyes scanning the surroundings.
Franca had successfully shaken her pursuer.
Lumian's guileless dog face lit up with a gratified smile.
The final stage of today's operation, getting rid of the would-be stalker, had been executed flawlessly. Franca, with Lie's assistance and her ability to counter divination, had done a commendable job!
She must have utilized the shoppers in the department store, changing into a different set of clothing as a ruse, transformed herself, and exited openly to evade detection.
After the woman in the hunting attire returned to the Red House Café, Lumian left Trocadéro and made his way toward Quartier Éraste.
While still in his canine form, he intended to explore the vicinity of Red Swan Castle.
Guillaume Bénet's Animal Creation Spell had a duration of seven days, after which it would naturally dissipate, requiring a new ritual.
As Lumian had anticipated, Red Swan Castle stood atop the hill, its beige exterior tainted with the marks of age-old blood. It stood in eerie silence, surrounded by a small river.
Lumian conducted a few circles around the area before arriving at the closest church building—the Sacred Heart Cloister of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church.
Beneath the shade of the green trees, he squatted quietly and gazed at the magnificent golden building adorned with steeples.
During his observation, Lumian couldn't help but notice a golden retriever squatting more than ten meters away, its attention also fixed on the Sacred Heart Cloister.

Chapter 366: Demoness Sect

Are all the dogs around the cloister so devout? He retracted his gaze while criticizing.

He quickly left the forest behind.

His primary concern was to chart a route from Red Swan Castle to the Sacred Heart Cloister, taking note of any advantageous terrain and hiding spots along the way. What the Sacred Heart Cloister actually looked like or if it held any special significance was of little concern to him.

By mid-afternoon, Lumian had thoroughly scouted the area surrounding Red Swan Castle. He discovered several potential escape routes, some following the main road, some along the freight railways, others winding through forests, past lakes, or over hills. Not only were they well-concealed, but they also featured natural traps.

Initially, Lumian had contemplated infiltrating Red Swan Castle in his canine form, but he soon realized that security was exceedingly tight. Stray dogs were not tolerated, and intruders faced certain death.

Unfortunately, the Animal Creation Spell only permits transformation into larger animals. The implicit requirement is that the hide must be able to envelop a curled-up human. Otherwise, I could transform into a rat. I don't believe they could guard against that! He sighed and retreated to a nearby secluded spot.

With his spirituality, Lumian manipulated the air within the dog hide and murmured two words of Hermes.

"His Grace!"

Creating a sound in this manner was not challenging for Lumian. What proved difficult was that his spirituality was constrained by the Animal Creation Spell. It could not extend beyond his body or the dog hide, and it was in limited supply. Thus, any sound produced remained confined to the dog hide, hidden from others' ears. Furthermore, he could dispel the incantation after uttering a few words.

In a swift, shadowy motion, the brownish-yellow dog skin split open, revealing Lumian's human form.

He crawled out, carefully folded the hide, and cradled it against his chest.

Though it had lost its mystical properties, Lumian had no intention of discarding it. Finding such a complete and large dog hide was a rarity.

I only have one ritualistic dog hide left. I must conserve it. Lumian

muttered these thoughts as he resumed his journey along the familiar road toward the nearest town.
In a bustling metropolis like Trier, ritualistic dog hides proved more practical than ritual sheepskin or cowhide. Donning the latter two and transforming into the corresponding animals would undoubtedly draw attention. After all, who wouldn't be tempted to guide a lone sheep wandering the streets home to prepare it into various delicacies? Moreover, in Trier, there were those with perverted inclinations, ones who fancied sheep buttocks.
...
As Lumian returned to Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, the night had already fallen, casting a dark veil over the city.
Franca swiftly changed back into her usual attire and settled into the recliner, her gaze fixed warily on the Lie necklace resting in a corner of the coffee table, as though it might spring to life and ensnare her at any moment.
"What's wrong?" Lumian closed the ajar door behind him and casually stowed away the Lie necklace.
Franca's expression shifted, and she sighed, confessing, "After I returned, I found myself with idle time, so I attempted to adjust my appearance, but..."
At this point, she let out another sigh, her emotions a mixture of fear and nostalgia.
"I became entranced by my own reflection in the mirror!
"I've never seen such a flawless woman. Just by gazing at her face, I could do so for an entire day—no, for eternity!"
Lumian contemplated her words for a moment before responding, "You can use Lie to deceive others, but never deceive yourself."
"I understand, but the allure of the Demoness of Pleasure and the effects of Lie are genuinely potent," Franca admitted earnestly. "It wasn't easy for me to regain control. I forcibly removed the necklace and tossed it onto the coffee table. While my fixation may be partially due to its amplification properties, I can't help but reminisce. I can't help but yearn to give it a try. Heh heh, my mind has passed the test."
With the Lie necklace out of her sight, Franca visibly relaxed. She chuckled and remarked, "Were you meme–uh, using your sister's way of speaking to caution me?"
"Yes, in preparation for your upcoming gathering," Lumian confirmed, making no effort to conceal the fact that he had been practicing Aurore's manner of speech recently.
Franca nodded thoughtfully and commented, "It felt quite natural. If it remains at this level, deceiving them shouldn't pose a

problem."
Without awaiting Lumian's response, the Demoness of Pleasure playfully inquired, "So, how did the honey-roasted chicken wings taste?"
Lumian provided an objective assessment, "They were decent."
Franca's curiosity and teasing spirit persisted as she asked, "Could it be that your taste buds were improved due to your canine senses? Had your sense of smell become more acute?"
Lumian replied with an experimental tone, "It does have some influence on me, but I haven't transformed entirely into a dog. I still retain a significant portion of my human senses."
Franca continued, "And what about other aspects?"
After a moment of contemplation, Lumian explained, "Other aspects? It's more like my soul is confined within a real dog's body. Everything I do is restricted and influenced by my physical form, including..."
Seated on the divan, he raised his leg, mimicking the posture of a canine taking a leak.
Franca exclaimed, "You really don't care about your image at all, do you? It doesn't bother you?"
Lumian shrugged, responding, "What's there to be concerned about?"
Franca thought for a moment before posing her final question, "One last thing, will you be affected by dog hormones and react strangely to other dogs?"
"The body is mine, and the dog is just a disguise. It's merely an external constraint." Lumian's expression suggested he wasn't a fool.
He then adopted a mimicry of Madam Magician and asked, "Are there any more questions?"
"I'm done." Franca was satisfied.
Lumian chuckled.
"Then it's my turn to ask. What are your thoughts on the ladies you observed today?"
Franca absently twirled a few flaxen-colored strands of hair that had come loose from her ponytail as she replied, "There are two potential suspects..."
She proceeded to recount her speculation and added, "That woman with the orange-red hair still gives me an odd sensation, as if she's drawing me in."
Lumian smiled approvingly. "You're onto something. She's at least a Demoness of Pleasure or a Beyonder with a corresponding mystical item."
After identifying that the Beyonder belonged to the Demoness

pathway, Lumian sensed a magnetic allure in every gesture she made, similar to Franca's. It was a bit challenging for him, with most of his abilities sealed, to resist such temptation. Fortunately, Alms Monk's endurance held firm.
"Demoness?" Franca pondered the possibility and mused to herself, "That makes sense. How could a gathering of females dedicated to pleasure not attract one or two Demonesses..."
Lumian had a moment of realization and posed a question, "Is it to bring pleasure to others and oneself?"
He sensed that this might be a fundamental requirement for their acting.
"That's one aspect of it. Even if it weren't for the potion, I'd still want to attend. However, I can control myself, but the same can't be said for other Demonesses," Franca said with disdain and a sigh.
Lumian, not fully grasping the implication behind her words, remarked, "She followed you but you managed to shake her off."
"Ah..." Franca was momentarily surprised. "She should be from the Demoness family."
"The Demoness family you mentioned?" Lumian had previously heard Franca briefly mention this secret organization.
He had always been curious about how Demonesses could form families.
Matriarchal society?
Franca sighed and said, "Yes, it's also known as the Demoness Sect. Its origins trace back to the descendants of the Primordial Demoness during the Fourth Epoch. The Primordial Demoness is a Sequence 0 of the Assassin pathway, essentially a true deity. She's widely regarded as an evil god, also known as the Chaos Demoness."
Primordial Demoness... Lumian committed the name to memory.
Franca continued, "The core of the Demoness family always includes a descendant of the Primordial Demoness, but they also recruit or cultivate Assassins with different surnames. It's essentially a sect that controls all the potion formulas and most of the resources related to this pathway.
"Only a Demoness from the Demoness Sect would tail a wild Demoness upon their first encounter."
"To retrieve the Beyonder characteristic?" Lumian inquired.
Be it recruitment or elimination, it was a way of reclaiming Beyonder characteristics.
Franca pursed her lips and responded, "Exactly. They don't want the Beyonder characteristics of the Demoness pathway to be lost outside their sect. Moreover, they hold a deep disdain for female

Assassins and eliminate any they come across."
"Why?" Lumian couldn't comprehend.
Franca shot him a resentful glance, as if blaming him for asking such a question.
She sighed and said, "It's because the Primordial Demoness was originally male. During the process of attaining godhood through the Assassin pathway, She transformed entirely into a woman. This transformation left Her mind twisted and filled with agony. The Demoness Sect claims they want to emulate the Primordial's experience.
"So, every Demoness in the sect was once male. After enduring immense pain and suffering, they became profoundly distorted. They yearn to see other men undergo similar ordeals. Perhaps you don't know, but these Demonesses seek out men to father their children. Baby girls are sent away, while baby boys are kept behind to relive their mothers' lives."
As Cordu's Prankster King, Lumian couldn't help but shake his head in disbelief.
"Isn't this incredibly twisted?"
"What's even more twisted is that these children's fathers eventually become Demonesses themselves." Franca recounted the information she had obtained from Madam Judgment and exhaled in fear. "I've been avoiding them, not wanting them to discover me."
"But you're originally a man. Why should you be afraid?" Lumian asked, puzzled. "Are you worried that being around them might corrupt you and warp your senses after joining the Demoness Sect?"
Franca nodded solemnly.
"Yes.
Besides, I'm already a Minor Arcana card holder of the Tarot Club. How could I possibly join the Demoness Sect?"
Lumian fell silent for a few moments before speaking again.
"Didn't you want to join the Iron and Blood Cross Order too?"
"That's different. It's a mission for the Tarot Club," Franca defended reflexively.
Lumian didn't press the issue and instead nodded thoughtfully.
"No wonder you mentioned that female orgies easily attract Demonesses."
Franca scoffed.
"It's just that most Demonesses are members of the Demoness Sect and have connections either vertically or horizontally. Otherwise, half of the female orgies might consist of Demonesses.
"What's even more extreme is that when you receive an invitation

to a strip ball and attend with enthusiasm, it's always packed with men."
After muttering a few words, Franca looked at Lumian and asked awkwardly, "So, what should we do next?"

Chapter 367: Salon

Lumian understood Franca's concerns and smiled.

"Two directions:

"First, consult with your Major Arcana card holder about the possibility of establishing contact with the Demoness Sect. Remember, you originally were a man, so there's no need to fret about being eliminated. As long as you can pass their background checks, you can tap into their resources to enhance yourself. And when pretending isn't an option anymore, have your Major Arcana card holder assign you a mission to steer clear of Trier and make a swift getaway.

"Think about it. You're already at Sequence 6. Most of the top-tier resources are within the Demoness Sect's grasp. Infiltrating their ranks and acquiring these resources from within is a much simpler and safer route compared to making enemies and taking risks to hunt them. Of course, this hinges on your Major Arcana card holder providing a way to elude the watchful eye of the Primordial Demoness."

Franca was taken aback and mumbled, "How do you sound so experienced..."

Lumian scoffed. "Are you amnesiac? I'm doing something similar right now. I'm infiltrating the Iron and Blood Cross Order on behalf of the Tarot Club.

"What's the major perk? Once I complete the Iron and Blood Cross Order's mission, I can claim rewards from Gardner Martin and report back to my Major Arcana card holder. I can use the pretext of my spying progress to secure rewards from her—two rewards with one mission. Otherwise, why do you think the number of mystical items on me have increased so rapidly?"

Of course, he didn't need to mention Mr. K's contributions to Franca.

"Two rewards with one mission..." Franca repeated it a few times before a realization dawned on her. "I've been cooperating with you on missions related to the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Will this clash with contact with the Demoness Sect?"

Lumian's expression said: "As expected, you're still inexperienced."

"There's no clash; why would there be? Simply convey to the Demoness Sect your desire to transition to the Hunter pathway at Sequence 4 and revert to your original gender. That's your motivation for pursuing leads on the Iron and Blood Cross Order. You've already left enough clues and made substantial progress.

"From what you've described, those Demonesses went from being men to women. I refuse to believe they haven't considered

leveraging the pathway switch to regain what they've lost. That reason should be enough to convince them.
"Moreover, Demonesses and Hunters belong to neighboring pathways. They surely have ulterior motives concerning the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Given your opportunity to infiltrate them, they're more likely to embrace you than hinder you. In fact, they might even value your presence.
"Most importantly, if things go as planned, you could become the Demoness Sect's liaison responsible for matters related to the market district and the Iron and Blood Cross Order. If you want the higher-ups among the Demonesses to be aware of what's transpiring here, they'll be informed. If you prefer keeping it under wraps, they'll remain oblivious. For instance, Jenna being a female Assassin."
At this point, Lumian smiled.
"You can also exploit the Demoness Sect to nurture Jenna. When the high-ranking Demonesses discover that a powerful pure female Demoness is paid for by their own sect, won't they lose control on the spot?"
It was an intriguing thought. It could be described as extreme provocation and mockery.
Franca nodded indiscernibly.
"Kid, if you had taken the Instigator potion, you might have fully digested it within a week."
"I'm just kindling a specific fire within you." Lumian leaned back on the sofa.
Franca couldn't help but scoff in a half-mocking, half-teasing tone.
"If I were to genuinely join the Demoness Sect, and you reach the Sequence 5 qualitative transformation without obtaining a Sequence 4 potion formula and the corresponding main ingredient from the Iron and Blood Cross Order, would you consider becoming a Demoness?"
Lumian considered the question seriously before answering, "It depends. If I urgently require the strength and capabilities of a Sequence 4 to complete specific tasks, it's not out of the question. I'll choose the path that's simpler and more attainable."
"..." Franca was taken aback. "Are you sure you won't find it mentally burdensome?"
He made it sound as if he was drinking absinthe or Lanti Proof tonight.
Lumian borrowed a phrase from his sister's vocabulary.
"I'll do whatever it takes." He then added, "I'll stop at nothing to achieve my goal.
"Besides, can't we just switch back when we reach Sequence 3?"

"You can't just switch at will. Most Beyonders never advance beyond Sequence 4 in their lifetime, let alone Sequence 3. As they ascend, it becomes increasingly difficult. Whether it's the risk of losing control or obtaining the necessary resources, the challenges remain the same," she cautioned.
Lumian let out a chuckle.
"Anyway, it's all just a fantasy at this point, isn't it? To confirm if it's feasible at all."
Franca was left momentarily speechless and then inquired, "You mentioned two directions. What's the other one?"
"The other option is to track down the Demoness of the Demoness Sect and extract detailed information about the female orgies from her. Subsequently, focus on identifying potential members of the Bliss Society among the participants. As soon as you can, pinpoint the core members with close ties to Susanna Mattise and eliminate any hidden threats," Lumian explained the alternative plan concisely.
"While it's a viable plan, if the Bliss Society members aren't directly involved in the female orgies and are merely associating with certain individuals, targeting the Demoness alone might not provide the information we need. Additionally, it's bound to draw the attention of high-ranking members of the Demoness Sect, leaving little room for further investigation. I'll start by reaching out to my Major Arcana card holder and inquire if she has any reservations about my contact with the Demoness Sect." Franca analyzed after some thought.
She was clearly tempted by Lumian's suggestion.
Lumian acknowledged her analysis without rushing her. After all, she wouldn't return to Trocadéro's Red House café for another two or three days, with an invitation to Count Poufer's salon preceding that event.
...
Three days after scouting the surroundings of Red Swan Castle and informing Madam Magician and Mr. K of the invitation, Lumian arrived at the beige castle in a four-wheeled four-seater provided by Gardner Martin.
He chose not to dress too formally for the occasion. No tailcoat, top hat, or cane that stereotypically marked a gentleman.
Instead, he wore a light-brown hunting suit, off-white breeches, and brown boots. In his hand, he held a Loen-style deerstalker hat, allowing his golden-black hair to catch the wind.
Lumian was aware, through Aurore's gossip, that appearing overly grandiose in a literary and artistic salon like this would make him appear out of place among the other participants, possibly even a

laughingstock.
Of course, this outfit had been funded by Gardner Martin's recent contribution of 10,000 verl d'or, costing Lumian a total of 1,000 verl d'or.
Holding the invitation letter, Lumian underwent the guard's scrutiny and passed through the imposing several-meter-tall door.
In this area, there was a hall, but it was relatively modest. It served as a waiting area for the butlers, valets, maids, and guards accompanying the guests during a grand banquet.
Lumian scanned his surroundings and confirmed that this wasn't the hall from his unsettling nightmare.
Beyond the hall was the atrium, and on the opposite side stood Red Swan Castle's main edifice.
It rose six to seven stories high and was encircled by a ring of towers.
Lumian couldn't help but glance up at a narrow window on the third floor.
In his nightmare, a man with dark-red hair had gouged out his own brownish-red eyes from behind that very window.
Now, however, there was nothing behind the clear glass window but a slightly mottled light-colored wall.
Mottled... Shouldn't the rooms' walls have been repainted? Aurore had mentioned that the annual maintenance cost for such an ancient castle is astronomical... Lumian shifted his gaze away and proceeded to enter the main building.
The moment he crossed the threshold, his eyes narrowed, and his heart sank.
This hall was an exact replica of the one in his nightmare!
From the crystal chandelier hanging high above to the spiral golden staircase leading to the second floor, everything mirrored his dream with eerie precision.
Though Lumian had expected this, encountering it in reality stirred up complex emotions within him.
The male servants in the hall, adorned in their vibrant red uniforms with golden trimmings, stood in two neat rows to welcome Lumian's arrival.
Lumian's eyelids twitched, finding the vividness of the red to resemble flowing blood.
The salon was situated in a spacious living room on the first floor, elegantly decorated with a thick, dark red carpet adorned with intricate patterns. A set of plush sofas graced one side of the room, and bar stools and armchairs were scattered around them.
On the opposite end of the living room, a tall young woman sat at a brown piano. She wore a simple yet pristine sky-blue-patterned

white corset dress, and her auburn hair cascaded gracefully down her back.
As Lumian entered the living room, the girl's fingers danced gracefully across the piano keys, conjuring a sprightly melody.
Count Poufer occupied an armchair, engaged in conversation with an elegant lady with black hair, blue eyes, and an air of refinement as she leaned against the armrest in a crouched position, chuckling merrily.
Novelist Anori, Painter Mullen, critic Ernst Young, and Poet Iraeta, each accompanied by their female companions, were either gathered on the sofa, engaged in conversation, or lingering near the table adorned with desserts and roasted meats.
In addition to these well-known figures, other guests filled the room. Lumian scanned the crowd and spotted a familiar face.
It was Laurent, the inhabitant of Auberge du Coq Doré, rumored to have used Madame Lakazan's hard-earned money to frequent upscale cafés and mingle with high society.
Laurent still donned the same pristine black tailcoat, and his neatly combed brownish-yellow hair followed a precise 30-70 cut. He stood out amidst the casually attired authors, painters, poets, and critics surrounding him.
He displayed no restraint in his interactions, his dark-brown eyes sparkling as he exchanged pleasantries with the gathered guests.
Within moments, Laurent locked eyes with Lumian, and his pupils dilated, as if he had encountered an evil spirit.
I-Is this not Ciel Dubois, the current owner of Auberge du Coq Doré and the infamous mob leader?
In an instant, fear coursed through Laurent's veins.
He worried that Lumian might expose his true identity, jeopardizing the connections he had painstakingly cultivated.
He was on the verge of success!
Oh, you're doing quite well. You've even received an invitation to such a salon... Lumian remarked with a smile, pointing to himself as if to suggest that they both belonged to a certain type and could feign ignorance of each other.
A sigh of relief escaped Laurent as Lumian approached Count Poufer.
With a hint of annoyance, he grumbled, "You didn't inform me about bringing a female companion. You're making me look like a fool!"
"Haha." Count Poufer and the others chuckled, delighted that their prank had succeeded.
After the laughter subsided, Count Poufer gestured toward the girl at the piano.

"If you don't mind, you can invite my cousin, Miss Elros."

Chapter 368: Speculator

Lumian settled into an armchair with a polite smile aimed at Count Poufer. He responded, "That would be my honor."

With a graceful gesture, he extended an invitation to Miss Elros.

Count Poufer, dressed in a crimson shirt, waved his hand.

"After she finishes playing this piece."

Lumian shifted his gaze towards the piano, finally getting a clear view of Miss Elros.

Her chestnut eyebrows framed her expressive brown eyes, which sparkled with a youthful vibrance. The delicate curve of her cheeks and gentle facial contours suggested her age to be under 20, and there was no apparent trace of Sauron lineage.

Lumian surmised that Elros likely inherited her Sauron lineage from her maternal side.

He turned away briefly, his fingers wrapping around a glass of red, white, and blue liqueur resting on the coffee table. Engaging in lively conversation with Count Poufer, Novelist Anori, and others, Lumian discussed the latest trends and scandals circulating in their circle.

He had been diligently reading newspapers like Novel Weekly, Journal des débats, Youth of Trier, and Ghost Face to keep himself well-informed for occasions like these.

The black-haired lady who had been kneeling beside Count Poufer had already moved away to observe the newspaper editors engaged in a game of billiards.

Lumian was aware that she couldn't be Count Poufer's wife. Aurore had once enlightened him about the peculiar customs of Trier: in intimate gatherings and small-scale balls, the male and female hosts refrained from appearing together. It was considered improper and might invite unnecessary gossip. Therefore, when one of them hosted a salon, their spouse would attend someone else's event.

Back when Lumian first learned of this, he was barely fifteen, and it struck him as a bizarre set of rules. Now, reflecting upon it, he couldn't help but think:

You Trieriens have devised such absurd and comical unwritten rules to facilitate discreet affairs, and everyone willingly adheres to them!

As the musical piece concluded, Elros gracefully left the piano and made her way to the sofas. Her cousin introduced her to Lumian, pulling over a barstool for her. She sat with her legs neatly together, a silent observer of the ongoing conversation.

As time flowed by, others gradually converged in their direction.

Laurent followed a casually-dressed, middle-aged man who sported an impressive beard.
Count Poufer took it upon himself to make introductions, saying, "This is Cornell, the editor-in-chief of Le Petit Trierien."
Lumian had perused the newspaper before, and he vividly recalled the for the "interstellar bridge to the crimson moon" featured in its pages.
Now, with that memory in mind, he couldn't help but suspect that it might be a cleverly disguised scam or perhaps a piece of Trierien performance art. He also harbored suspicions that it might be connected to devotees of some evil god.
"This is Ciel Dubois, the general manager of Coastal Import and Export Corporation," Poufer introduced the identity Gardner Martin had fabricated to Cornell.
Cornell extended his right hand with a look of surprise as he greeted Lumian. "You're quite the young lad."
Lumian accepted the handshake, offering a charming smile.
"This is the result of my unwavering diligence and hard work."
Just as Poet Iraeta was on the verge of commenting on the diligence of most individuals present without becoming the general manager of a large company at such a young age, Lumian added a touch of self-deprecation to his tone.
"It's precisely because I excelled in both areas that my father appointed me as the general manager of the import and export company."
The room erupted in laughter as everyone grasped Lumian's meaning.
Their perception of Ciel Dubois underwent a positive transformation.
In their social circle, there was no shortage of individuals who had landed important positions at a tender age due to familial connections. These people typically either avoided mentioning their parents and elders, striving to demonstrate their self-proclaimed abilities, or they struggled with confidence and maturity, endlessly fixating on their fathers or uncles. There were very few who exuded the kind of openness, honesty, and humor that Lumian effortlessly radiated. Back then, Count Poufer could scarcely be counted among them.
Lumian, with a touch of mischievous humor borrowed from his sister, turned his gaze toward Laurent and inquired, "Who might this be?"
Thud! Thud! Laurent's heart raced in response.
While they had an unspoken agreement not to reveal each other's true identities, Laurent lacked a thorough understanding of Ciel

Dubois, the mob leader, and worried that Lumian might suddenly change his mind.
Cornell, the editor-in-chief of Le Petit Trierien, gestured to the young man by his side.
"This is Laurent. He's remarkably talented, well-informed, and unfailingly polite. I've been observing him for nearly three months, and I'm considering offering him a position as my assistant and deputy editor-in-chief. Laurent, how do you feel about this unexpected proposition?"
Laurent initially found himself taken aback, but soon, he was overwhelmed by joy and felt a slight sense of vertigo.
All the pains and anxieties he had endured, from his mother's tears to his neighbors' disdain, had led to this moment.
He had always believed that with his talents, he shouldn't be stuck at the bottom, and he had been actively seeking an opportunity, even if it meant squeezing his mother dry to maintain a facade of dignity.
Laurent refrained from displaying excessive excitement and responded to Cornell with a gracious smile, saying, "It would be an honor."
Not bad at all, Lumian thought as he assessed the situation. Speculation could be a risky endeavor, but the rewards could be substantial. However, there's the importance of changing one's mindset and genuinely starting from their current position. Speculating to improve social status might lead to losing everything in the long run. Lumian recalled his sister's comments after losing in the stock market as he considered Laurent's actions.
He was unlike Charlie and others; Lumian held a disdain for those who exploited their mothers in the speculative process. As long as Laurent's mother could accept it and didn't resort to violence against her son or show strong resistance, Lumian didn't pass harsh judgment.
With Cornell and the others now seated, Lumian's curiosity led him to ask, "Where did you first encounter Laurent?"
Cornell responded with a smile, "At the Vichy Café. He often visits to engage in discussions about various Trier-related matters and to share his opinions."
Vichy Café—the place where 5 verl d'or could buy half a bottle of mineral water and two boiled eggs? Laurent's mother, Madame Lakazan, doesn't even earn 3 verl d'or after a long day's work. Yet, the investment has clearly paid off. Even a rookie deputy editor-in-chief at a newspaper like Le Petit Trierien earns nearly 5,000 verl d'or annually, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. Lumian observed the differences and realized that Laurent's fixation on

speculative networking had a certain logic.
Still, success in such endeavors was a rare occurrence—one in a hundred at best.
Lumian cast a glance at Laurent, who eyed him with caution, and smoothly changed the subject with a smile.
"Cornell, I happened to come across an for the Interstellar Bridge in Le Petit Trierien last month, or perhaps even earlier. It piqued my interest. Any comments about it?"
Cornell indulged in a puff from his pipe before bursting into laughter.
"I believe it's a bunch of delusional folks, but since they paid, there's no reason why I shouldn't run their . Maybe it can fool some fanatical enthusiasts of mechanics and science."
"How are they now?" Lumian chuckled. "I'm even thinking of investing in them, just to see if they're swindlers or if they can actually produce something."
Poet Iraeta picked up his pipe and muttered, "You might as well sponsor me instead of investing in them. At least then, you can berate me for writing like a piece of dogsh*t, and I won't have any comeback."
Lumian played along, acting as if money was of no concern to him. "No problem. How about 5,000 verl d'or?"
His intention was to give Iraeta only 3,000 verl d'or later, using the excuse of not having enough cash on hand at the moment.
Iraeta lowered his pipe and spread his arms theatrically.
"Praise the Sun and let Ciel's malice strike harder!"
"Haha, let's head back to the old city together after the salon."
Lumian subtly hinted at his intention to sponsor Iraeta later but refrained from handing over the money directly to avoid the stink of money.
Following this brief diversion, Cornell seemed to warm up to Lumian's presence.
"I'm not sure how those people are faring. They only paid for a one-month ad."
As the conversation flowed, Count Poufer glanced at the setting sun and proposed a game with a warm smile. "Shall we play King's Pie? Consider it a warm-up before dinner."
Is this the only game you know? Do you have a childhood... Lumian couldn't help but inwardly critique Count Poufer's choice of games, but he refrained from objecting.
The others readily agreed, and Count Poufer promptly instructed his valet to bring out the sizable King's Pie that had been prepared in the kitchen.
It resembled the lid of a grand saucepan, emitting a tantalizing

aroma and color.
"Who shall be in charge of the cutting?" Count Poufer surveyed the participants, his gaze sweeping over each of them.
After a moment's thought, he decided, "Elros, you do the honors. You're the youngest and most beautiful lady here."
Elros, seated on a barstool beside Lumian, gracefully rose and took up the table knife to start dividing the King's Pie.
Rather obedient of your cousin. Living off the Sauron family, off Count Poufer? Lumian realized that Elros's techniques were deft, perhaps from frequent practice.
In no time, the colossal King's Pie was divided into roughly 29 portions.
As was customary, Count Poufer proposed offering the extra slice to his ancestor, Vermonda Sauron, and no one voiced any objections.
After completing this part of the ritual, the living room seemed to descend into an eerie silence, as if the very atmosphere outside the castle had solidified.
Count Poufer then turned his attention to Lumian and Laurent. "Laurent, this is your first time attending my Saturday salon with Ciel. You'll be the first to choose."
Lumian laughed and said, "Of course, the host should be the first to choose. Don't you all think so?"
Instigated by him, the other participants readily agreed that the male host should have the honor of making the initial selection.
Count Poufer didn't insist and took up a slice of King's Pie, addressing the group, "Whoever bites into the gold coin shall be king."
Seeing that the Sauron family member had made the first choice, Lumian felt more at ease and leaned forward to survey the slices.
This was double insurance. First, he would let Count Poufer make his selection. Then, while there were still plenty of slices left, he would exploit Termiboros's aversion to the matter to choose a slice without the gold coin.
This time, Termiboros remained silent, not offering any warnings.
Lumian naturally picked up the King's Pie slice he had personally selected.
But as he settled back into his seat, his mind spun unexpectedly. It was as if he saw the narrow glass window once again, and the image of the dark-red-haired man who had gouged out his own eyes intruded upon his thoughts.

Chapter 369: King? No, Emperor!

Compared to his previous nightmare, Lumian could now "see" him more clearly. The dark-red-haired man behind the narrow glass window bore a striking resemblance to Count Poufer.

As he raised his right hand to dig at his eyes, his facial muscles twitched, and his facial contours transformed, instantly becoming identical to Lumian's.

It was identical to Lumian Lee from Cordu Village, not the current Ciel Dubois!

When the dark-red-haired man with Lumian's face gouged out the bloody eyeball, Lumian's eyes ached, and his vision darkened.

Simultaneously, wild laughter echoed in his ears, infecting him to the point where he wanted to release his frustration, unleash violence, and satisfy his bloodlust.

Suddenly, his right palm heated up, and pure madness surged into his mind.

Out of nowhere, frustration, violence, and bloodthirst surged out of him as the maniacal laughter instantly ended.

Lumian's vision returned to normal, and he saw Novelist Anori sitting across from him, with Count Poufer beside him.

They grinned as they observed the other participants selecting slices of King's Pie, completely unaware of the unusual changes happening to Lumian.

Lumian counted the King's Pie slices that had vanished and glanced at Laurent, who was engrossed in his choice. He realized that only a few seconds had elapsed, but it felt like an eternity.

Drawing upon his Alms Monk abilities, he resisted the emotional turmoil stirred by the Blood Emperor's presence. He faintly perceived a peculiar, insane, bloody, and ruthless mental impression lingering in the void above him.

The desire to infiltrate Lumian's body, sending shivers down his spine, remained suppressed by Alista Tudor's hidden aura; it dared not descend. Instead, it circled above the living room, akin to vultures eager to feast on carcasses but cautious of nearby predators.

None of the participants in the King's Pie game detected the existence of such a manic spirit glaring fiercely at them from above. They giggled and selected their slices of King's Pie.

Come, dance with the Blood Emperor! Let's see who's crazier, you or Alista Tudor! Lumian scoffed inwardly, his emotions in turmoil.

Of course, he understood that his Blood Emperor aura was a mere facade. If the spirit were to forcefully enter his body, he wouldn't have the power to resist it. All he could do was hope that Mr. Fool's

seal would activate and yield some effect.
However, judging by appearances, the frenzied and cruel spirit lacked any rationality. It operated solely on instinct and harbored an innate fear.
Lumian took a moment to collect himself. While observing Elros and the others choose their King's Pie slices and sensing the frenzied spirit's erratic movements, he contemplated the corresponding dilemma.
This appears to be the core of the Sauron family's King's Pie game...
Poufer employs his bloodline and a simplified ritual to summon the lingering spirit of his ancestor, allowing it to inhabit the person who consumes the symbol and becomes the king...
If a frenzied and bloodthirsty spirit were to truly take control of my body and corrode my mind, I might lose my sanity instantly. It's nearly impossible for ordinary individuals to resist such a force. What does Count Poufer rely on to maintain his composure? At the very least, he seems normal and has become king countless times...
No wonder Termiboros insisted I switch slices last time. If I were to lose control, He wouldn't fare any better...
Son of a sow! *Why didn't you warn me today?* Did you choose to remain silent because you knew I possessed the Blood Emperor's aura and wouldn't succumb to this insane mental invasion?
Where does this frenzied spirit originate from? It's been two to three hundred years; how can it still exist?
Could it be that the Sauron family has a special method for preserving the spirit of a high-ranking individual across generations? Or could Vermonda Sauron actually still be alive? Or perhaps the Beyonder trait he left behind has become too corrupted? Is the Sauron family attempting to gradually eradicate it using this method? But it's been two to three hundred years!
Gardner Martin's objective is to ascertain Vermonda's condition...
Hmm, this crazy spirit continues to hover above my head without descending... Will it eventually retreat, change its target, or trigger other alterations?
Lumian remained on high alert, keeping a constant watch on the frenzied spirit lingering in the air.
If it displayed any signs of forcefully invading through the Blood Emperor's aura or causing other unfavorable developments, Lumian would opt to "teleport" away.
Anori, Mullen, Iraeta, and the others each selected their King's Pie slices, leaving only the one reserved for Vermonda Sauron on the plate.
Count Poufer surveyed the surroundings with a grin and declared,

"Everyone, let's dig in. The one who finds that gold coin will be the king for today."
With that, he elegantly sampled a portion of the King's Pie in his hand, then took a few more bites. His countenance gradually shifted from one of confidence to one of blank panic.
There was no gold coin!
Count Poufer stared at the other participants in disbelief, his assurance of control crumbling.
In that moment, a single thought consumed his mind:
No, this can't be! I'm the one who most closely resembles my ancestor!
His eyes fixed on Elros, the sole guest possessing the Sauron family's bloodline.
Though Elros was perplexed by her cousin's frantic and intense gaze, she still took a few bites of her King's Pie slice.
Yet, still, there was no gold coin to be found.
Count Poufer's confusion deepened. His gaze darted around, his mind racing with conjectures.
Could there be an illegitimate son of a family member here?
No, even if there were, I bear the closest resemblance to the ancestor!
Could a high-ranking member of the Hunter pathway be present?
Impossible!
Or perhaps someone here has been tainted in the underground world?
Lumian noticed Count Poufer's distressed head-scratching, and most of the game participants had sampled their King's Pie slices. He gradually lifted his right hand and took a bite.
As anticipated, his teeth encountered a solid metallic object.
He spat out the item onto his left palm. It was, without a doubt, a 10-verl d'or gold coin.
Count Poufer's pupils widened as he fixated on Lumian's visage, a burning desire to dissect every inch of his flesh evident in his gaze.
Novelist Anori let out a chuckle.
"Ah, a new king at last. It being always Poufer tires me out. He was getting rather dull with his pranks."
Lumian picked up the gold coin and cast a cold glance at Anori.
"Who gave you permission to speak?"
Anori's body quivered, and he instinctively clamped his mouth shut.
Lumian struggled to maintain control over the influence of the Blood Emperor's aura. He sensed the frenzied spirit above him spiraling faster and faster, as if growing more impatient and savage.

He surveyed the surroundings leisurely and offered a smile.
"From this moment forward, I am your King. Or would you prefer to address me as Emperor?"
For some inexplicable reason, all the participants, including Count Poufer and Miss Elros, experienced a stirring in their hearts, as if they were compelled to heed Lumian's commands.
Of course, it was merely a pulsing sensation, induced by the combined impact of his words and aura.
Among them, Poet Iraeta, who had recently entered into a sponsorship agreement with Ciel Dubois, rose nonchalantly, pressed his hand to his chest, and bowed.
"Indeed, Your Majesty!"
The others followed suit, either embracing the spirit of the game or yielding to the pulsing sensations in their hearts. They stood and offered their bows in their own unique ways.
"Indeed, Your Majesty."
Lumian's lips curled into a satisfied smile as he signaled for everyone to retake their seats.
Then, he turned his gaze towards Count Poufer and raised his chin slightly.
"I command you to present 30,000 verl d'or worth of gold."
Count Poufer was taken aback, a whirlwind of complex emotions surging within him.
This was the first time he had been subjected to the King's Pie commands.
He had an urge to respond with a jest, but he remembered the gravity of the consequences if he disobeyed the king's orders during this mystical game. He would meet a dreadful fate.
Count Poufer clenched his teeth and rose from his seat.
"Indeed, Your Majesty."
Exiting the living room, he ascended to a floor of the castle's main building and retrieved five hefty gold bars from a secure vault.
For him, parting with 30,000 verl d'or wasn't a significant loss.
Seeing Count Poufer offering him gold bars totaling 30,000 verl d'or, Lumian couldn't help but feel a pang of regret.
Had he known that his orders would be followed to the letter, he might have demanded even more!
The dilemma now lies in how to discreetly make off with the gold later. In normal circumstances, even if I accepted 30,000 verl d'or in person, I would have to privately return it. Failing to do so could offend Count Poufer... Moreover, I need to figure out how to explain to Gardner Martin that I had become king while remaining unaffected. Lumian pondered as he tucked away the five gold bars.
Then, he turned to Novelist Anori.

"Your mission is to bestow a kiss upon someone here. Your target is..."
As Anori eagerly eyed the beautiful women present, Lumian pointed towards Poet Iraeta, who had just taken a puff from his pipe.
"Our poet."
A momentary silence hung in the air, followed by a whistle from one of the guests, and then the others joined in.
Reluctantly, Anori stood up and muttered, "I really don't want to kiss that guy with bad breath. I could accept it if it were Mullen..."
Despite his reservations, he complied, giving Iraeta a gentle kiss on the lips.
Iraeta took it in stride, chuckling, and remarked, "I can sense your discomfort, Anori. Pull yourself together. Don't act like a naive country bumpkin."
Lumian observed with an impassive expression, his attention primarily drawn to the swirling madness.
Though it refrained from attempting to invade anyone's body, the influence of the madness made everyone slightly restless, their emotions displaying signs of instability.
Upon hearing Iraeta's teasing, Anori's countenance turned icy, as if he contemplated picking up a table knife and stabbing him.
However, he ultimately restrained himself.
Lumian suspected that as the game unfolded, the participants would grow increasingly agitated, irritable, and prone to bloodlust while the madness continued to linger.
At that very moment, a piercing, terrified scream echoed from somewhere within the castle.

Chapter 370: Sending Off

A chilling scream, filled with terror, reverberated through the living room, causing the hearts of every guest to race with fear.

Painter Mullen was very sensitive to this. His pale-white complexion exchanged a concerned look with Count Poufer.

"What happened?"

Count Poufer furrowed his brow, puzzled by the sudden disturbance.

Upon hearing Mullen's question, he snapped back to attention and casually reassured everyone,

"It seems there may have been an accident. I'll have a servant find out the details. Don't worry, it won't disrupt our gathering. What could possibly go wrong?"

With that, Count Poufer signaled to his valet, positioned discreetly in a corner of the living room, to investigate the source of the scream.

Then, he addressed the assembled guests, saying, "Please, let's continue."

As he spoke, the Sauron family member directed his gaze towards Lumian.

Ever since presenting the gold bars, he had been closely watching Emperor Lumian, analyzing every subtle movement and expression. He was determined to unravel the mystery of how Lumian had chosen the King's Pie slice with the gold coin and not him.

Lumian fought to keep his composure in the face of the madness that seemed to consume him and turned his gaze towards Painter Mullen.

"Create a piece of art using your buttocks."

In his role as Cordu's Prankster King, Lumian had an array of tasks in his arsenal to assign to each participant in the game, ensuring that none of them would forget their missions.

Yet, Lumian's main concern wasn't the playful antics but the malevolent presence that loomed over the sofas.

This sinister entity refused to dissipate, even after failing to infiltrate Lumian. It hovered in the air, exuding an impatient, bloodthirsty, and irritable aura.

Lumian suspected a connection between the earlier scream and this ominous mental vortex.

The handsome yet pallid and weary painter, Mullen, stood in bewildered silence, grappling with this bizarre request. Painting with one's buttocks was entirely uncharted territory.

Novelist Anori and the others, having readily accepted their own

missions, not only cheered with enthusiasm but also summoned the servants to bring paint and drawing paper. They even "assisted" Mullen by loosening his belt.
With no escape, Mullen reluctantly covered his posterior with paint and made a few awkward imprints on the drawing paper. The result resembled a child's crude doodle.
Observing this spectacle, Novelist Anori was struck by an idea.
"Why don't we frame it and send it to art critics? Let's see their reaction to such a unique creation."
"The painting's signature is the word 'The Emperor.' For the title... Right, Mullen, any suggestions?"
Mullen, avoiding the crowd, cleaned himself up and contemplated for a moment before responding, "Let's call it 'Café.'"
Curious, Cornell, the editor-in-chief of Le Petit Trierien, asked, "What does it signify?"
Mullen shook his head as he discarded the paint-stained handkerchief and soft paper, pulling up his pants. "It doesn't signify anything. This painting was meaningless from the start."
As they discussed, Count Poufer's valet returned to the living room and whispered something into the host's ear.
Influenced by the unsettling aura of the Blood Emperor's madness, Lumian struggled to make out the words despite his best efforts, catching only fragments.
"Lost... harm... danger..."
Count Poufer's expression darkened, a hint of seriousness creeping in.
He nodded subtly, signaling for his valet to return to his previous position, maintaining an air of nonchalance.
Observing Count Poufer's reaction, Lumian racked his brain, searching for a way to dispel the malevolent spirit.
I can't wait for everyone to complete their missions, can I? No, there's one crucial step missing. At the end of the previous King's Pie game, Count Poufer had consumed the King's Pie slice meant for Vermonda Sauron...
With this thought in mind, Lumian fixed his gaze on the untouched offering that remained on the plate. Leaning forward, he extended his right hand and claimed it.
Count Poufer had no doubts about this.
From his perspective, it would be suspicious if Lumian didn't retrieve the offering!
Almost simultaneously, the frenzied entity, radiating negativity, reacted vehemently, positioning itself directly above Lumian's head.
It emitted waves of negative emotions, as though cursing the

audacious human who dared to partake in its offering.
Lumian sensed anger, hatred, and an insatiable desire to rend his soul asunder.
Yet, he remained unfazed and even smiled.
This reaction confirmed that he had made the correct choice!
Had the agitated spirit not responded so vehemently to his appropriation of the offering, Lumian would have remained clueless about how to banish it from lingering above everyone's heads.
This wasn't a guarantee of success, and it might entail danger, but it was a preferable alternative to the participants of the King's Pie game growing increasingly agitated and bloodthirsty, ultimately turning on each other.
When the moment was right, Lumian could still "teleport" away. As for the others, barring Count Poufer, their chances of survival were slim.
Naturally, he couldn't predict whether there would be unforeseen changes or new threats after consuming the offering, but in this dire situation, it was better than nothing.
For the participants in the King's Pie game, Lumian's intervention was their only hope. Without his actions, their demise was certain. With them, there was a fighting chance.
Lumian raised the sacrificial King's Pie to his lips and took a substantial bite.
The frenzied spirit grew even angrier and more violent.
It no longer hovered above the others but remained directly above Lumian's head. At times, it seemed poised to descend upon him, while at others, it attempted to tear into its target. However, it was thwarted by Alista Tudor's aura, instinctively holding back from further aggression.
Another scream resounded.
It came from somewhere in Red Swan Castle—originating from a different person than the previous one.
A moment ago, it had been a man, but now, it was a woman.
Count Poufer's eyelids twitched, and he smiled.
"It seems the servant responsible for cleaning up the earlier mishap must have stumbled upon some rather terrifying sights."
Literary critic Ernst Young and the other guests readily accepted this explanation.
As guests, they lacked the authority to pry into the castle's internal affairs. Moreover, they had gradually become engrossed in the King's Pie game, growing a tad fanatical, impatient, and preoccupied, diverting their focus away from other occurrences within the castle.

Lumian relished the King's Pie offering, savoring the intangible anger and curse like a melodious symphony playing in his ears.
Compared to the horrifying ravings he endured whenever he received a boon, this was akin to the beautiful performance of an orchestra.
Unable to vocalize itself and hesitant to invade his body, the frenzied spirit could only indirectly influence his emotions and mental state.
During this process, Lumian turned his attention to assigning missions to various individuals, noting that the participants were fully immersed in the game, their gazes fixed on it.
Periodically, another scream would punctuate the air, sending shivers down the spine.
Finally, Lumian finished the offering, and the frenzied spirit hovering above him abruptly halted.
In the next instant, it vanished mysteriously, dissipating into thin air.
While the participants of the King's Pie game still appeared fanatical, their irritability and agitation had considerably waned.
Lumian let out a quiet sigh of relief and turned to Elros, seated beside him.
"Let's see you do the Twist. If you're not sure how, ask someone to show you."
In contrast to the risqué Can-can dance, which was already laden with suggestive undertones, the Twist seemed relatively innocent as long as it wasn't a male-female dance. However, it had a comical appearance.
Elros complied, rising from her seat and attempting the Twist with a hint of awkwardness.
Amidst the laughter of those present, Lumian continued to assign missions to the remaining participants.
After all the participants had completed their assigned missions, Lumian straightened up and assumed an air of superiority as he delivered his final instruction.
"Last mission:
"Keep everything that happened today a secret. You must not divulge anything about today's game to anyone."
"Yes, Your Majesty!" Elros and Laurent, still caught up in the game's ambiance, responded in unison, their expressions displaying utmost respect.
This compliance was partly due to the lingering presence of the Blood Emperor's aura that still clung to Lumian.
Observing the instinctive obedience of each participant, Lumian let out a contented sigh and offered a warm smile.

"That concludes today's game."
Count Poufer rose from his seat and gestured with a smile.
"Let's proceed to the dining room."
As they moved from the living room to the dining room, they had to pass through the castle's main hall. Lumian, who had returned to his usual self, noticed out of the corner of his eye that a few valets and maids were diligently at work near the corridor.
They were using mops to clean up a reddish puddle.
Red... Lumian's eyelids twitched as he swiftly averted his gaze.
Following dinner, the guests bid their farewells one by one. Lumian sought out Count Poufer and retrieved the five heavy gold bars with a smile.
Count Poufer shook his head.
"Since I proposed the game, I must adhere to its rules. Do you think so little of me, believing I can't do without the 30,000 verl d'or?"
"It's simply a gesture of courtesy," Lumian responded with a smile.
He didn't insist and smoothly returned the gold bars to his pocket.
According to their arrangement, Lumian arranged for the poet, Iraeta, to join him in his four-wheeled, four-seater carriage. Using the pretext of having limited funds on hand, he handed Iraeta only 3,000 verl d'or.
Iraeta didn't seem to mind at all. He stashed away the banknotes and engaged in a conversation about his artistic preferences.
As the carriage began its journey, Lumian inquired, "Which district are you heading to?"
"Just take me to the Sacred Heart Cloister," Iraeta replied with a grin. "I'm meeting a friend there. Sponsored poets always find friends to share a drink with."
Sacred Heart Cloister... Lumian nodded slightly and instructed the carriage driver accordingly.
Before long, the carriage arrived at the picturesque cloister. Even in the darkness of night, the golden façade of the building reflected the crimson moonlight, creating a surreal and dreamlike atmosphere.
After watching Iraeta enter the cloister, Lumian directed the carriage driver to head back to Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.
As the carriage rattled along, leaving behind the woods and fertile fields,
Lumian suddenly heard the resonant voice of Termiboros.
"A dangerous creature is tailing you; it has been since Red Swan Castle. It brims with hostility and is preparing to strike."
Dangerous creature... Lumian narrowed his eyes, calmly opened the carriage door, and effortlessly leaped out.

Facing the carriage driver, he spoke with the remaining authority of an Emperor, "Wait for me in the nearby town."
The carriage driver hesitated for a moment before complying with the order.
As Lumian watched the carriage and its driver disappear into the distance, he calmly retrieved the Flog boxing gloves from his briefcase and methodically donned the iron-black gloves.
The nearby forest seemed to darken, and the river that flowed through it took on an eerie blood-red hue.

Chapter 371: Wax Statue

A figure emerged slowly from the blood-stained river.

Lumian's mind seemed to freeze momentarily for some inexplicable reason as he observed the figure crawling ashore. Instead of an immediate attack, he watched the figure climb out of the water.

The unfamiliar man's face bore an eerie stiffness, and his clothes clung to him from being soaked in water. The latter seemed to merge with his flesh.

It was a wax statue, a wax statue that came to life!

Crimson blood seeped from the waxen figure, mixing with the river's flow before smashing against the wild grass along the bank.

The wax statue's light-blue eyes shifted slightly within their white sockets, casting a vague reflection of Lumian.

Meeting that gaze left Lumian feeling overwhelmed, unable to resist mentally or physically. Instinctual fear surged within him, drowning out all other emotions.

Suddenly, Lumian's survival instincts kicked in, fully erupting and overpowering all other emotions and states.

Lumian's vision was restored.

The wax statue, with its cold, unyielding eyes, was now less than a meter away. Its pale-white hand, dripping with blood, extended its fingers like deadly blades, thrusting toward him.

Lumian had no time to react. He raised his right palm to shield his face, and there was a resounding impact as the wax statue's razor-sharp finger collided with his iron-black Flog boxing glove, adorned with short thorns.

Where the boxing glove fell short, the wax statue's finger pierced Lumian's palm, leaving a conspicuous wound on his face.

Had he not shaken off the initial intimidation, the blow might have punctured his skull and reached his brain.

The familiar searing pain jolted Lumian awake. Clenching his left hand, he conjured a blazing crimson flame and launched a powerful punch at the wax statue's face from the side.

Simultaneously, with a smile, he tightened his right palm, using his own flesh and blood to hinder the wax statue's right hand, preventing it from evading his fiery strike.

Bang!

The Flog boxing gloves knocked the wax statue's head askew, and the iron-black thorns on their surface etched exaggerated scratches onto its unyielding face, the wounds shifting from deep to superficial.

Despite the vivid flow of bright red blood, there was no flesh-like

texture to the injuries, only layers of wax that seemed to melt under an invisible fire.
In response, blood-colored capillaries extended from the wax statue's light-blue eyes, exuding an intense, bloodthirsty desire that lent it an eerie vitality, making it resemble the living.
Lumian had chosen the Flog boxing gloves for its potency, a mystical weapon of utmost power, especially against the creature that Termiboros had labeled as dangerous. He couldn't afford to be careless. However, he never expected his enemy to be a wax statue rather than a living being.
It rendered the Flog's ability to evoke specific desires or emotions ineffective; it could only serve as a defensive tool.
If not for the bizarre intimidation, Lumian would have discarded his boxing gloves and opted for the Decency brooch. Now, with his adversary before him, he had no choice but to stick with the Flog gloves, focusing instead on Fire Infusion.
To his astonishment, his punch had ignited the wax statue's bloodlust, suggesting that the entity retained a degree of life, along with faint emotions and desires of its own.
"Good to see you're still kicking!" Lumian's grin widened.
He pulled back his right palm, gritting his teeth through the pain, and his fiery fist realigned the wax statue's head.
The wax statue, its bloodthirsty desires now heightened, showed no inclination to increase the distance between them. It resumed its intimidating tactics, instinctively and desperately engaging in close combat with Lumian.
This played perfectly into Lumian's strategy. His iron-black boxing gloves, ablaze with crimson flames, consistently clashed with the wax statue's limbs, fists, shoulders, torso, and head in rapid, precise succession.
Each punch lacked brute force; what Lumian needed was a relentless onslaught.
Bam! Bam! Bam! Bang! Bang! Bang! Lumian's fists, adorned with the Flog gloves, trailed crimson flames, effectively suppressing the agile and skilled wax statue to the point where it couldn't employ any other abilities.
His feet executed a fluid dance of stepping forward and raising knees to fend off the attacks from below.
Within a mere ten to twenty seconds, the wax statue abruptly ceased its movements, and an ethereal explosion emanated from its form.
The capillaries within its eyes ruptured, staining the once light-blue hue a vivid crimson. Cracks crisscrossed its head, connecting with the injuries inflicted by the Flog gloves.

Desire Detonation!
Lumian's relentless assault had triggered the Desire Detonation effect of the Flog boxing gloves.
In response, Lumian withdrew his fists and watched in silence as the wax statue's blood-red eyes revealed signs of pain.
Two crimson teardrops slowly welled up at the corners of its eyes, streaming down its waxy cheeks.
The wax statue opened its mouth as if attempting to speak, yet no sound escaped.
Rumble!
A muffled explosion emanated from within its body, and the exaggerated wounds extended across its form.
Crimson flames erupted from these regions, engulfing the wax statue entirely.
Fire Infusion!
Amidst the fierce inferno, the wax statue rapidly softened, its body dripping with blood-stained, viscous droplets.
Thud!
It collapsed to the ground.
What kind of monster is this? Lumian gazed at the fallen creature for more than ten seconds, his Hunter's instincts telling him that this prey couldn't possess Beyonder characteristics.
During this moment, he retrieved his briefcase and carefully stowed away the Flog boxing gloves.
Without hesitation, Lumian turned and exited the forest.
Behind him, crimson flames surged, consuming his dripping blood.
Within the blazing inferno, the wax statue had melted beyond recognition. Lumian's figure gradually faded, disappearing not far from the scene.
Spirit world traversal!
To evade the attention of evil gods and the dangerous entities summoned by the Flog boxing gloves, Lumian shifted his position, effectively "teleporting" to a nearby town.
It was a location he had scouted in advance, with precise coordinates within the spirit world.
After several dozen seconds, the forest path was suddenly replaced by a desolate wilderness, with only a few flickering flames remaining.
The weeds gradually flourished, and the figure of a person in a white robe materialized swiftly.
This figure donned a light-colored veil, and her abdomen was notably swollen. An unmistakable maternal aura enveloped her form. It was Lady Moon of the Nightstalkers.

Lady Moon directed her gaze towards the entirely melted, blood-stained wax statue, silently observing the dance of crimson flames.
After more than ten seconds of contemplation, the woman and the desolate wilderness vanished.
...
In a room within the main building of Red Swan Castle,Count Poufer, clad in a red shirt and sleek black trousers, occupied a cluttered desk. His icy stare remained fixed upon the wax statue's head placed before him.
The head bore an uncanny resemblance to a living being, with light-blue eyes and jet-black hair.
As the silence lingered, Count Poufer couldn't conceal a hint of restlessness. Occasionally, he tugged at his collar, shifted in his chair, and even unbuttoned the top of his shirt, as if the air had grown unnaturally thin, impeding his breathing.
As time ticked by, the wax statue's head suddenly emitted an ominous cracking sound.
It shattered into numerous pieces, each one grotesquely melted.
Poufer shot to his feet in shock, his pupils dilating in disbelief.
Tiny blood vessels protruded from his eyes, ruptured, and dyed them a vivid shade of red.
It was killed? Poufer murmured to himself, his astonishment mingling with suspicion.
Ciel Dubois was even more mysterious and formidable than he had initially thought!
Even if he wasn't, the hidden faction operating behind him was!
Count Poufer paced back and forth with a solemn expression.
...
After Lumian "teleported" to the town ahead, he exercised caution, remaining concealed in the shadows while meticulously calculating the time.
Only when he felt that a Hunter could potentially reach his location from the forest by running did he cautiously make his way into the town. He located the carriage driver and arranged for his return to 11 Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.
In a room adorned with bookshelves, Lumian fixed his gaze upon Gardner Martin, who held a cigar in his hand. Lumian spoke frankly, "I was attacked."
There was no way to hide the truth from the Boss.
"Huh?" Gardner Martin responded in his distinctive nasal tone.
Lumian proceeded to recount the events, detailing how he had chosen the King's Pie slice after Count Poufer and subsequently felt

a frenzied spirit attempting to invade him. He described how he had utilized Fire Infusion to dismantle and melt the wax statue, displaying the wounds on his hands and face.
What Lumian chose not to reveal was that he had discerned why the frenzied consciousness hadn't fully occupied his body and that he had used the Flog boxing gloves. He attributed the former to an unknown cause.
Gardner Martin smoked his cigar, listening quietly, unsurprised that Lumian's mind had remained incorrupt.
Had he displayed any hint of astonishment or suspicion, Lumian would have swiftly "invited" Mr. K to eliminate the Iron and Blood Cross Order's stronghold.
With a cigar in hand, Gardner Martin smiled and remarked, "It appears that the official members of our Iron and Blood Cross Order are more favored by Poufer's ancestor's spirit than Poufer himself. However, we also instill fear in it."
Does this refer to Beyonders who have succumbed to the peculiar corruption at 13 Avenue du Marché? The frenzied consciousness won't invade the other formal members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, even in the absence of the Blood Emperor's aura? I wonder how true this is. *Why don't you give it a try, Boss?* Lumian suddenly felt the urge to goad Gardner Martin into playing King's Pie with Count Poufer.
"Now, I've confirmed something," Gardner Martin's expression grew serious. "The ancestor of the Sauron family, Vermonda Sauron, is not truly deceased. He exists in a manner beyond our current comprehension."

Chapter 372: Primary Mission

Lumian couldn't quite understand how Gardner Martin could be so certain that Vermonda Sauron wasn't dead. Still, it seemed that the other party didn't intend to explain, so he could only give up on asking.

He was concerned about one thing:

"Does that mean my mission is over?"

Clearly, combined with Count Poufer's fondness for creating wax statue heads for friends he knew and the fact that a wax statue had attacked him, Lumian believed that he was now under suspicion by the other party. It would be very dangerous to interact with him again.

Gardner Martin shook his head slowly.

"No, you have to continue."

Holding the cigar, he stood up and paced towards the floor-to-ceiling windows.

"The fact that you became the king after Poufer will undoubtedly make him suspicious of your origins, but he will be more eager to find out the real reason for that incident. The subsequent wax statue attack was mainly attributed to this.

"Therefore, he will still invite you over to test you in different ways and extract your hidden secrets. For us, this is an opportunity to confirm the true state of Vermonda and the Sauron family's ancestors.

"And through this, we can grasp the reason for the gradual decline of this once exceptionally powerful family. This is of great significance to us, who are also mainly from the Hunter pathway. It is our primary mission now.

"To put it simply, the Sauron family is like Red Swan Castle. They've been in disrepair for a long time, but they hide many secrets. They have guards that can deter spying. What we need to do is figure out the castle's defense flaws and confirm if those secrets pose a fatal threat to us. Then, we can find an opportunity to break through the guards, bypass the traps, and take the treasure.

"Don't worry, I'll covertly provide protection for Poufer's future invitations. The risk you'll take won't be significant."

Lumian pondered for a moment and said, "Commanding Officer, you mentioned before that our primary mission is to find the true entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier."

How could the primary mission change so easily?

Gardner Martin took a puff of his cigar and smiled.

"These two matters are connected to a certain extent and serve the

same purpose, but you don't need to know for the time being."
What's their motive? In other words, the Iron and Blood Cross Order's current focus is on exploring the underground, finding the entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier, investigating the Sauron family's decline over the past 200 to 300 years, and securing something precious from them? According to Mr. K, one reason for the Sauron family's decline is their descent into madness and the loss of many important members over time. Gardner Martin and I are mainly responsible for the Sauron family aspect. Are the other members, including Supervisor Olson, exploring the underground? Lumian had a clearer understanding of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's recent plans.
This was also his primary mission.
Of course, he only knew what to do and didn't understand why.
"Yes, Commanding Officer," Lumian agreed without further ado.
He had a hunch that this would be an opportunity for him to digest the Pyromaniac potion and advance further on the Hunter pathway.
According to Madam Magician, the Sauron family was once a powerful faction with a Hunter angel.
Gardner Martin didn't inquire about how much gold Poufer had offered to the "king," hinting that Lumian could leave and await the Count's future invitation.
Passing through the renovated hall, Lumian spotted Faustino, the butler, who was also an official member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, leading a black-cloaked figure in.
The man was of average height, barely 1.75 meters tall. His attire was loose, and he was tightly wrapped, obscuring his exact appearance and physique.
Lumian could only determine that it was a man based on his walking posture, height, and strides.
Faustino nodded at Lumian as a greeting before leading the mysterious man through the hall and into Gardner Martin's study.
Who could it be? *What brings him here so late at night for a discussion?* Lumian averted his gaze, his thoughts racing as he left 11 Rue des Fontaines.
...
In the market district, Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré.
Upon reaching the second floor, Lumian suddenly gave weight to his pace, producing thumping sounds.
He leisurely returned to Room 207, ignited the carbide lamp, turned around in the armchair, and sat down. He smiled at the unlatched door.
After 20 to 30 seconds, soft footsteps echoed from Room 201.

The footsteps hesitated before showing determination. Soon, they arrived outside Room 207 and gently knocked on the door.
"Please come in," Lumian said, raising his chin slightly.
As expected, it was Laurent. He wore a linen shirt and black pants, completely different from whenever he headed out.
After closing the door, Laurent looked at Lumian and said, "Monsieur Dubois, I wish to borrow 500 verl d'or from you."
Lumian was taken aback, not expecting this development.
He thought the man was here to plead with him not to expose his true identity.
Unexpectedly, he came to borrow money!
"Why 500 verl d'or?" Lumian's expression remained unchanged.
Laurent's voice deepened as he said, "I'm about to become one of the deputy editors-in-chief of Le Petit Trierien. Although I'll be the most junior-ranking editor, I can't continue living here. I have to invite my colleagues to gatherings at home regularly to build a good relationship with them.
"Therefore, I wish to borrow 500 verl d'or to rent a good apartment in Quartier de l'Observatoire or Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. I want to bring my mother there and use the time to teach her how to host a small banquet.
"Once I receive my salary, I'll repay the debt in installments. How much do you think the interest rate should be?"
This is not only borrowing money to secure his job, but also taking the initiative to give me leverage and some benefits so that I won't ruin his plans... Lumian thought a little higher of Laurent and nodded thoughtfully.
"I don't need interest. You'll definitely come into contact with some interesting news, information, and s at Le Petit Trierien. I hope you can organize them regularly and give me a copy."
As Lumian spoke, he took out his wallet and counted five banknotes worth 100 verl d'or.
"Just pay it back this year."
Laurent heaved a sigh of relief and said, "No problem."
After watching the speculator write the IOU and leave Room 207, Lumian took out the five heavy gold bars from Count Poufer's pocket and tossed them in his hand.
With this unexpected windfall, he had amassed 75,000 verl d'or worth of gold. At the same time, he had 2,000 verl d'or that hadn't been exchanged for gold and the remaining 4,000 verl d'or funds for his activities.
It won't be long before I complete the Armored Shadow's contract and summon it again... Lumian fiddled with the gold bars for a while before leaving the briefcase containing the Flog boxing

gloves on the armchair. He washed up and went to bed, awaiting the inevitable nightmare.
...
In his daze, Lumian once again caught sight of Red Swan Castle, its beige outer walls stained with aged blood.
In a daze, he walked in and arrived at the large living room where he had played King's Pie.
Miss Elros, Painter Mullen, Le Petit Trierien's editor-in-chief, Cornell, and the other guests who often attended Count Poufer's banquet sat on the sofa, as if awaiting Lumian's arrival.
Laurent and the other guests' temporary female companions were absent.
This made the scene seem like another salon or a past one.
As Lumian approached the sofa, Count Poufer and the others stood up and greeted him respectfully.
"Good afternoon, Your Royal Majesty," they greeted in unison.
Instinctively, Lumian glanced at them coldly.
"Oh?"
Count Poufer and the others were taken aback for a moment.
"Your Imperial Majesty!"
Lumian nodded slightly and settled into an armchair, watching as the guests settled around him.
They chatted nonchalantly, their topics diverse and vague.
Suddenly, Novelist Anori raised his right hand and scratched his face.
With a tearing sound, he ripped off a large piece of skin, revealing squirming flesh and blackened tubes.
Almost simultaneously, Painter Mullen and the others either stabbed themselves in the heart or tore at their companions' necks.
In an instant, the entire living room turned abnormally bloody, and there was a terrifying scene everywhere.
Lumian's thoughts raced as his vision underwent an immediate transformation.
In another hall of the castle, surrounded by countless lit white candles was a coffin.
The coffin was made of bronze and its surface was rusted. It was unknown how long it had been there.
Lumian's heart swelled with sorrow and helplessness, as if he had lost his kin and support. He slowly extended his right hand, attempting to caress the rusty bronze coffin.
At that moment, the coffin's lid creaked open, revealing a deep crack.
Suddenly, a palm with dark-red, nearly-black blood vessels

extended, holding an extremely withered heart with some blood seeping out.
The heart was still gently and indiscernibly contracting and expanding.
Upon seeing the withered heart, Lumian's thoughts raced chaotically, tainted with a certain madness.
His right palm felt slightly warm, and he suddenly woke up from his dream.
He wasn't surprised or flustered by the nightmare. As he calmed his racing heart, he recalled the details of the nightmare.
Gradually, Lumian frowned.
In the first scene, most of the King's Pie game participants eventually went crazy. They either mutilated themselves or others, but there were three exceptions. Even when the scene changed, they were still normal.
One was Lumian himself, and the other was Count Poufer.
There was another one Lumian hadn't expected: Miss Elros!
She's not as reserved and obedient as she appears. She has her own secrets... Lumian smiled silently.
As for what the bronze coffin, dead body, and withered heart represented in the second scene, he couldn't decipher them at all. He could only guess that it might be related to the Sauron family's secret.
Just like the last time, Lumian had several nightmares that night, but the clarity and completeness of his dreams gradually decreased.
Just before dawn, the nightmare was completely gone.
After waking up, Lumian quickly wrote a letter and sent it to Madam Magician while his memories still remained fresh.

Chapter 373: Summoning the Armored Shadow Again

After fifteen minutes, Madam Magician replied with a brief letter:

"The Iron and Blood Cross Order's investigation into the Sauron family's decline contradicts my previous speculations. It seems that what they claim to have may not align with their actual possessions. Perhaps they possess only critical information that allows them to achieve their goals under specific conditions. One of these conditions is unavoidable for the Sauron family."

Lumian's temples throbbed at Madam Magician's response. She had conveyed a lot, but the crucial details remained elusive. While he understood each word individually, their combined meaning eluded him.

What does the Iron and Blood Cross Order actually possess and what does it claim?

Lumian massaged his temples and continued reading.

"This situation presents both danger and opportunity for you. Investigating the truth behind the Sauron family's downfall is a mission I eagerly anticipate. Mr. Fool assigned this long-term mission to our Tarot Club, much like the Two of Cups interacting with the Demoness Sect to confirm the Primordial Demoness's condition. There's no need to rush. Take your time. Even if it takes years to complete."

"..." Lumian was taken aback.

He had expected Franca's Major Arcana, Madam Judgment, to agree to her contact with the Demoness Sect. But what kind of terrifying mission was it to ascertain the Primordial Demoness's condition?

That was a true deity!

Based on Lumian's recent knowledge from various sources, not only was direct observation of deities impossible, but attempting to understand Their specific situation was exceedingly perilous.

As for the evil gods like the one known as Inevitability, mere awareness of Their existence equated to corruption.

A long-term mission... a task that could only be completed once Franca achieved demigod status? Lumian thoughtfully read the last sentence of Madam Magician's reply.

"Focus on this matter. If you need help or find yourself in a bind, contact me in advance. As for the Aurora Order, refrain from participating in other missions. Concentrate on the Iron and Blood Cross Order. I believe Mr. K will understand."

Madam Magician had previously tasked me with infiltrating the Aurora Order and slowly gaining Mr. K's trust, with the ultimate goal of becoming an Oracle. However, it is apparent from her tone

that priorities had shifted. Now, she emphasizes giving precedence to the Iron and Blood Cross Order... Lumian discerned this as a significant signal from her reply.
Crimson flames erupted as Lumian burned the letter in his hand. He slung a satchel over his shoulder and placed the Flog boxing gloves inside. Then, he made his way to Rue des Blouses Blanches.
He located a random café and had breakfast there.
It wasn't until nearly nine o'clock that Lumian knocked on the door of Apartment 601.
Franca didn't express any annoyance at being awakened this time. She didn't appear to be asleep, wearing a troubled expression instead.
Upon seeing Lumian, she tugged at her flaxen-colored hair, which was left untied, and said, "Guess what? I've accepted a suicide mission!"
"Confirming the Primordial Demoness's condition?" Lumian chuckled.
Sensing that Franca had done so willingly, he no longer fretted about her.
"How did you know?" Franca asked, surprised.
"Do you want to hear the truth or a lie? For the lie, I divined it. The truth is, I just reported the recent situation to my Major Arcana card holder, and she mentioned your choice." Lumian strolled over to the divan and sat down casually. "Where's Jenna?"
Realization dawned on Franca as she casually said, "To Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
"Ever since she received her father's compensation, she's been keen on instigation. Yesterday, she poached a supporting actress whose contract had expired and convinced her to switch to a theater in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. While it did boost her income significantly, I could have matched the offer if I had been informed. Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons has been quite profitable lately."
Franca didn't hold a grudge against Jenna because Jenna had sought her opinion beforehand and obtained her approval. She believed such instigations were beneficial. Plus, having a supporting actress leave opened up opportunities for apprentices like Jenna and the former dancers.
After recounting the matter briefly, Franca sighed and continued, "Madam Judgment only wants me to interact with the Demoness Sect. Under the condition that I control my desires and mental state, I can use their resources to enhance myself, monitor their activities, and understand their immediate plans. Confirming the Primordial Demoness's condition can be considered once I truly

attain godhood and become a saint. I can deduce certain situations through the Demoness Sect's activities, their recent plans, and the reactions during prayers to the Primordial Demoness."
"Aren't you troubled by the mission?" Lumian raised his eyebrows.
Franca sighed.
"I am troubled by the mission, but what's troubling is that I'll remain a Demoness at Sequence 4. I won't be able to transform back into a man."
"You can wait until Sequence 3," Lumian suggested with a relaxed demeanor.
"That's true, although it would be even more challenging." Franca had thought it through and then asked why Lumian had suddenly reported the situation to Madam Magician.
Lumian briefly recounted his experience at Red Swan Castle from yesterday and Gardner Martin's words, omitting specific details.
Franca listened intently, contemplating for a moment before saying, "Our current missions combined involve the secrets and movements of the relevant factions within the Hunter and Demoness pathways.
"The Tarot Club appears to attach great importance to such matters..."
Lumian chuckled.
"That's the only way we'll have a chance."
Franca acknowledged his words tersely and suddenly remembered something.
"How much gold did you command Count Poufer to give you?"
"30,000," Lumian replied honestly.
Franca's eyes lit up.
"How much gold do you have now?"
"75,000. I can add another 6,000 at any time," Lumian disclosed without hesitation.
Franca's smile widened.
"Then I'll lend you 25,000 first, interest-free!
"Let's summon the Armored Shadow tonight and try to figure things out before the gathering next week."
"You have 25,000 verl d'or?" Lumian was mildly surprised.
He recalled that Franca had spent all her savings to advance to the Demoness of Pleasure.
Franca said smugly, "I received 20,000 verl d'or for assisting you in dealing with Guillaume Bénet, and Gardner Martin has been quite generous lately. He entrusted me with managing most of the earnings from Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons and the dancers. Heh heh, Madam Judgment even provided me with 10,000 to support my activities."

Your earnings are quite impressive as well... Lumian realized that while the profits from Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons and the dancers might not match those of Salle de Bal Brise, they were undoubtedly substantial. If Franca could claim a significant portion of them, she could easily make around 20,000 per month.
He nodded and said, "Alright, we'll perform the summoning ritual at 11 tonight at the same place the other time."
Franca's joy was palpable.
"I'll arrange for someone to exchange the 25,000 gold right away."
...
Late at night, at Rist Docks, within the charred remains of a building.
Franca observed Lumian as he set up the altar and placed all the gold upon it.
Rather than staying outside the wall of spirituality, she chose to remain by her companion's side.
Lumian proceeded to light the candles one by one, letting the essential oil drip. Stepping back, he intoned, "The Fool that doesn't belong to this era;
"..."
Almost simultaneously, Franca chanted Mr. Fool's honorific name, ensuring her safety in the presence of the ritual's power.
Soon, amid the faint fog and a sense of impending danger, Lumian recited the final part of the incantation.
"I!
"In the name of the great Fool, I summon:
"The spirit that wanders the void, a combination of numerous shadows, Lumian Lee's contracted creature."
Within the wavering candlelight, an ethereal door adorned with enigmatic symbols materialized. From it emerged a shadowy figure clad in dark armor reminiscent of fish scales.
Just as before, each scale seemed to bear a face, each belonging to a different creature.
Those are indeed fish scales... Franca couldn't tear her gaze away, her anticipation and anxiety
overriding the eerie ambiance that surrounded them and the evident malevolence emanating from the Armored Shadow.
Lumian locked eyes with the Armored Shadow and spoke in Hermes, "I will fulfill the contract and offer you gold valued at 100,000 verl d'or."
To be honest, Lumian harbored some doubts about the 100,000 verl d'or worth of gold. The ever-changing exchange rates between verl d'or and gold left him uncertain whether he should prepare the amount based on the exchange rate at the time of signing the

contract or the current rate. As a precaution, he had only acquired an additional 1,000 verl d'or worth of gold as a backup.
As Lumian finished his words, the gold bars, jewelry, and various items on the altar suddenly disintegrated, transforming into golden particles that flew toward the mysterious illusory door.
Most of these particles landed on the Armored Shadow, while a few passed through the open illusory door and disappeared.
Gradually, almost a fifth of the Armored Shadow's pitch-black armor, resembling fish scales, transformed into gold. It was no longer dark and foreboding but radiated a holy and pristine aura.
Franca's eyes widened.
Legends and terms from her original world rushed into her mind as she muttered to herself, "Could this be... the reconstruction of the golden body?"
In her memory, the golden body referred to the golden powder or gold foil applied to the surface of idol statues. Sometimes, it denoted the special form of someone with godlike status or significant achievements. The Armored Shadow now resembled a weathered statue that had been rejuvenated with a coating of golden powder.
When all the gold on the altar had vanished, Lumian sensed that the contract had been completely fulfilled.
Taking the opportunity, he asked on Franca's behalf in Hermes, "Where do you come from?"
The Armored Shadow opened its mouth and spoke with a deep, dignified, and somewhat sinister voice.
However, Lumian couldn't comprehend its words at all. He could only watch in confusion as the Armored Shadow returned to the illusory door.
Once the summoning ritual concluded, Lumian turned to Franca and noticed that her companion seemed lost in thought, her brows furrowed.
His heart stirred as he asked, "Did you understand the Armored Shadow's response?"
Franca nodded slowly.
"The language he used is very similar to the language from my home world.
"He said..."
Franca paused and muttered to herself, puzzlement evident on her face,"The Blood Son of Heaven disrupted the netherworld, and the Underworld Daoist sacrificed himself to enter the river."

Chapter 374: Preliminary Speculation

Despite Franca speaking Intisian, it left Lumian perplexed. He struggled to grasp her meaning or intentions.

Surveying the silent ruins around him, he found nothing out of the ordinary. Turning his attention back to Franca, he inquired, "Care to explain?"

Franca contemplated for a moment before responding, "The Son of Heaven is roughly equivalent to an Emperor. As for Daoist, eh—think of it as a mighty Beyonder."

"In essence, this Emperor, bearing the title 'Blood,' wrought havoc in hell, sowing chaos. As for the Daoist known as 'Underworld,' a powerful Beyonder, they made the ultimate sacrifice, entering a certain river to seal away this Emperor."

The Emperor with the title of Blood... Lumian was alarmed.

"The Blood Emperor?"

Memories from the Samaritan Women's Spring came flooding back.

In those vivid recollections, the Blood Emperor's elusive figure burned with concealed flames, his battered armor soaked in blood. The dark waters receded within the fountain only to surge forth again, merging with the ethereal mist, transforming into a pale spring. Alista Tudor's apparition was tugged back into the fountain's depths by an inexplicable force. It appeared as though a fierce battle had transpired between the two entities...

With Franca's explanation, Lumian's mind began to piece together a new interpretation of the Armored Shadow's cryptic words and his encounter.

He said thoughtfully to Franca, "I suspect the 'Blood Son of Heaven' you mention is none other than the apparition of the 'Blood Emperor' Alista Tudor."

"But how did the Blood Emperor's apparition find its way to my home?" Franca didn't immediately connect it to Alista Tudor, but Lumian's deductions were beginning to make sense.

The special fish-scale armor and the Spell of Harrumph, which originated from myths and legends, made her suspect that the Armored Shadow came from back home. And now, the language basically matched, making her even more certain.

Lumian nodded, continuing, "I'll have to start with the events at the Samaritan Women's Spring, where Madame Hela and I fetched the water..."

"You went with Madame Hela?" Franca murmured, her curiosity piqued but allowing Lumian to proceed.

Lumian went on to recount the events at the Samaritan Women's

Spring in detail, ensuring Franca remained focused on his narrative. He then presented his theory.

"I suspect that during the War of the Four Emperors, the Blood Emperor did not fully perish. For some extraordinary reason, He preserved a fragment of His lingering soul. During the godly war, a passage was opened between our world and your homeland, allowing a mysterious river from your world to infiltrate ours. Mr. Fool sealed it, creating the Samaritan Women's Spring.

"This river appears closely tied to the realms of death and the Underworld. The Blood Emperor's apparition, trapped in a state of death, traverses between your world, the Samaritan Women's Spring, and even the Fourth Epoch Trier.

"The Blood Emperor possesses an innate desire for resurrection, and the first step to achieving that is to escape the river's confinement. In this process, He brought chaos to the Underworld of your homeland. The powerful Beyonder from the domains of Death and the Underworld had no choice but to make the ultimate sacrifice, immersing themselves in the mysterious river to harness its power fully and seal away the Blood Emperor's apparition."

Franca alternated between confusion and clarity. When Lumian finished sharing his theory, she responded with a mixture of surprise and suspicion, saying, "Your guess seems quite realistic and logical..."

His explanation shed light on the words of the Armored Shadow and the peculiar occurrences at the Samaritan Women's Spring.

Franca fell into a brief silence, then continued, "Back in my homeland, that elusive and mysterious river is known as the Yellow Springs."

"However, before I transmigrated, the Yellow Springs and the netherworld were nothing more than legends, unverifiable myths. There were no tales of the Blood Son of Heaven or the Underworld Daoist...

"Could it be that I was just an ordinary person who never had the opportunity to encounter such things?"

Lumian chuckled.

"Before I discovered Aurore was a Warlock, concepts like superpowers, demons, and ghosts were nonexistent."

Franca acknowledged his words, her expression gradually shifting towards excitement.

"Now that there's a passageway connecting our worlds, returning home is no longer an unattainable dream!"

Lumian, in a friendly tone, warned, "Madame Hela mentioned that the pale-white spring water is deadly to anyone who touches it."

Franca's expression froze for a moment, then she replied, "That may be true for us now. But with the power of godhood and ascending to sainthood, we might be able to handle it."
Lumian reminded her again, "There are the figures of an angel and a true god imprisoned in the spring."
"..." Franca rolled her eyes at Lumian. "Aren't you a buzzkill! Compared to before, when we had no answers, no direction, and no hope, now there's a glimmer of hope. We know where to focus our efforts. One of the reasons Madame Hela went to retrieve the Samaritan Women's Spring might have been to confirm if it's connected to the Yellow Springs. She's truly exceptional at finding leads!"
Lumian simply shrugged, opting not to dampen Franca's newfound optimism and enthusiasm.
Franca's excitement was palpable as she paced back and forth before suddenly posing a question.
"Were you asking where the Armored Shadow came from? Why did it mention the Blood Emperor and Daoist Underworld?"
That wasn't an answer!
Could there be some hidden secret?
Lumian thought for a moment and said, "It's a shadow born after death, and some of its abilities clearly belong to the Death domain. It also has a strong urge to break free from its restraints and escape imprisonment... Given these factors, I believe it's a ghost-like entity sealed by Daoist Underworld. Asking about its origins would inevitably lead to uncovering the current state of the Daoist Underworld, which is why I received that answer."
Franca was enlightened.
"That makes sense!
"Underworld Daoist destroyed its golden body and sealed it. Could that be why it's collecting gold to reconstruct its golden body and break free from its imprisonment?"
Observing Lumian's puzzled expression, Franca clarified the concept of a golden body and her interpretation.
"Is that so?" Lumian nodded slowly. "It seems like we might be able to continue trading gold with the Armored Shadow in the future, but fully restoring it to its original state should be avoided. This entity is extremely dangerous and holds a deep malice. I wonder what it will do once it escapes its seal."
Franca agreed wholeheartedly. "At the very least, we need to advance to Sequence 4 before considering this matter."
Lumian snickered. "Didn't you mention that achieving godhood and becoming a saint is an arduous endeavor? Why the newfound confidence?"

Franca glared at Lumian. "Isn't it because I have a goal now? Can't I indulge in a little daydreaming with all the motivation I have? Seriously, did we switch roles?"
She recalled that not long ago, she had remarked that Lumian made the path to godhood and switching pathways sound too simplistic.
Lumian chuckled and said, "It's good to have a goal and motivation. Yes, the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's gathering is coming up next week. Should I inform the others about the Armored Shadow, the Blood Emperor, Underworld Daoist, and the Yellow Springs?"
Franca pondered for a moment and said, "In the past, I would have shared this information, but now I can't do so until I solve the issue with April Fool's Day. However, we can inquire about the illusory river related to death and see if anyone has relevant information."
Lumian thought for a moment and said, "I'll do the asking."
Franca was momentarily surprised but quickly understood Lumian's reasoning.
Lumian had gone to the Samaritan Women's Spring with Madame Hela. It made more sense for her companion, who was posing as Muggle, to inquire about the situation at the Samaritan Women's Spring. There was a logical rationale behind it.
From Hela's perspective, Lumian and Hidden Blade were strangers who didn't know each other. If Franca were to casually mention the River of Death, it would undoubtedly raise suspicion.
...
On Monday, Franca arrived at Trocadéro's Red House Café once again.
This time, she had taken care to dress more in line with her usual attire, wearing a shirt, pants, and boots, even though she still maintained her black-haired, brown-eyed form.
Her intention was to create the illusion that she was a man who had transformed into a Demoness, which she hoped would deter any sudden attacks from the Demoness she was waiting for.
However, the long-haired orange-red Demoness did not appear throughout the morning. Instead, Franca found herself engaged in conversations with two female patrons who took the opportunity to strike up a chat with her.
Franca calmly sipped her coffee, seemingly unfazed by the interactions.
She couldn't help but notice that Lumian appeared unusually calm and encouraged her to take her time. Franca understood the urgency of eliminating the core members of the Bliss Society,

particularly those close to Susanna Mattise. Failing to do so would mean Lumian would forever be overshadowed by the Rose School of Thought.

...

Lumian had already reported to Madam Magician about the Bliss Society, the Rose School of Thought, and the activities at the Red House Café. The response he received was concise: "Do not leave Trier for the time being, and there should be no major issues."

Lumian ignited the letter and departed Rue du Rossignol, strolling towards Avenue du Marché.

As he approached Salle de Bal Brise, he spotted a familiar figure—a man with dark-brown eyes, a prominent nose bridge, and a flaxen-colored beard that covered his chin. This man wore a robe reminiscent of an ancient Warlock's attire. It was Secrets Suppliant Osta Trul, the same person who had introduced Lumian to Mr. K's mysticism gathering.

"My cabbage," Lumian inquired with a smile. "What brings you here?"

Osta Trul responded with a magnetic voice, "I've come to find Baron Brignais to settle my debt."

"You've got the money?" Lumian raised his eyebrows.

Osta Trul smiled and replied, "Yes, I've come to realize that some honorific names derived from the potion can be used for prayers. There's no danger involved. This discovery has been quite helpful to me."

Lumian was slightly taken aback by this revelation. With a dark look, he tapped his chest four times—up, down, left, and right.

Osta Trul mirrored his actions with an even warmer smile.

Lumian didn't continue the small talk. He simply waved his hand and walked past Osta Trul.

Quietly, he approached the white spherical statue constructed from skulls outside Salle de Bal Brise, releasing a soft sigh.

At 9 p.m., Lumian returned to Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré. He finally received a letter from a pure silver skull with pale-white flames burning in its eye sockets.

The letter was from Hela, and its content was brief.

"There will be a gathering in one hour.

"If you wish to participate, silently recite the following incantation within five minutes of 10 p.m."

Chapter 375: Gathering Venue

It's finally here... Lumian exhaled, folded the letter, and left Auberge du Coq Doré.

He didn't need to look for Franca. They had discussed the gathering many times before, so there was no need to waste time confirming it.

Lumian made his way to the new safe house on Rue du Rossignol and tossed the satchel containing the Flog boxing gloves onto the bed.

He hadn't prepared an additional iron cabinet. With a few traps hidden in the room, regular thieves couldn't approach the core area. Forcing their way in would only cost them their lives. An iron cabinet wouldn't stop exceptional thieves anyway.

When the time was right, Lumian donned a hooded black robe that bore a striking resemblance to the attire worn by Warlocks, all according to Madame Hela and Franca's descriptions of his sister's appearance at these gatherings.

Then, he pulled out Lie and transformed it into a simple yet exquisite silver-white earring. He secured it onto his right earlobe.

Gazing into the full-length mirror, Lumian maintained a calm demeanor as he observed a sudden transformation of him growing shorter. His hair morphed into a luxuriant shade of pure gold, growing thick and cascading down his back.

His facial features underwent a metamorphosis, mirroring those etched in his memories of Aurore. His nose bridge, now elevated and delicate, complemented his lips, neither too full nor too thin, painted in a subtle shade of red. His eyes, light-blue and clear, emitted a faint but captivating luminescence.

In the past, Lumian had always perceived his sister as a paradox, her inner self contrasting sharply with her outward appearance. She exuded an aura of sunshine, cheerfulness, and open-mindedness, yet in reality, she was a homebody, reluctant to venture out for social interactions. Only those who had truly earned her trust were privileged to witness her relaxed demeanor, the quirky phrases she often uttered, and her playful and bullying side.

On the contrary, Aurore displayed no apprehension when stepping out into the world. Much like Lumian, she possessed the natural ability to connect with the elderly ladies of Cordu and regale the children with captivating stories, earning their affection.

Ever since Lumian had learned about his sister's true background, he had come to comprehend the stark divergence between Aurore's inner self and her external appearance and demeanor. Certainly,

many people grappled with such contradictions, but Aurore's unique circumstances had magnified this incongruity.
Lately, Lumian often found himself pondering what his sister had been like and the kind of life she had led.
As he stared into the mirror, Aurore's light-blue eyes seemed to take on a misty quality, as if she too were lost in reminiscences of days gone by.
Lumian still held vivid memories of the first time his sister had mentioned her homeland. It happened during his second year in Cordu.
Back then, when the shepherds had returned to the highland pastures, Aurore had taken him to pat the newly born lambs and, "cruelly" bought their loved ones. They ventured into the green pastures adorned with white and yellow wildflowers, carefully selecting a spot that wouldn't disturb the serene surroundings. They then set up a charcoal grill for a picnic.
As night descended upon them, and the starry heavens unveiled themselves like a boundless river of glistening diamonds, Aurore suddenly drifted into a reverie, her fingers brushing away tears.
Lumian inquired about her thoughts, and she confessed to a profound sense of homesickness.
Aurore's gaze in the mirror seemed to lose focus, mirroring the soft, yellowish-blue glow of the carbide lamp.
The mountain village nestled beside those vibrant green pastures under the radiant sun—it was a place they could never return to.
After a while, Lumian opened the pocket watch he had borrowed from Salle de Bal Brise, confirming the time.
Then, he donned a sleek silver-white half-mask, revealing his finely sculpted lips and chiseled chin to the world.
Without delay, Lumian retrieved a piece of paper adorned with the ancient Feysac script and affixed it securely to his left breast, displaying the word "Muggle."
As Franca had explained, the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society boasted a sizable membership, each member donning unique disguises during their gatherings. Without the corresponding code names, distinguishing one from another would be an insurmountable task, save for those closely acquainted with each other.
Despite hailing from the same world, the society's members hailed from diverse homelands, each with their distinct languages. Upon their transmigration to this world, they found themselves scattered across different countries, inevitably erecting language barriers. Initially, they relied on the linguistic prowess of fellow members who were polyglots. However, over time, they gravitated

towards adopting ancient Feysac, the common tongue of the Northern Continent, as their shared language.
For Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members residing in different nations, ancient Feysac bore striking similarities to their mother tongues, easing its acquisition and mastery.
Naturally, there were exceptions among the society's ranks—those whose native languages diverged significantly from ancient Feysac—but they were a minority. They had to follow the majority, knowing that, until they mastered the language, someone would always be there to translate for them.
Lumian had already laid a strong foundation in ancient Feysac. Ever since his arrival in Trier, he had diligently immersed himself in Aurore's grimoires, plunging deeper into this linguistic realm. Basic communication posed no challenge for him any longer.
Approaching 10 p.m., Lumian made final adjustments to his appearance in front of the full-length mirror, ensuring everything was in its rightful place. He concealed an assortment of ritual components and the alcohol flask containing the Decency brooch within the concealed pocket of his Warlock-like black robe.
With Madame Hela's letter clutched firmly in his hand, Lumian began the recitation for the Hermes gathering.
"A Beyonder from ancient times, Ruler of the Nation of the Evernight, noble Mother of the Sky, I beseech your permission to enter your kingdom."
As the words escaped Lumian's lips, the world around him underwent a sudden and eerie transformation. He beheld his own reflection in the mirror, like a pencil sketch hastily erased by an eraser.
His vision dimmed, plunging him into what felt like the deepest of slumbers.
Abruptly, Lumian's consciousness drifted to the gathering, the pounding of his heart resonating within his ears.
He snapped out of his reverie, finding himself within a palace marked by crumbling stone walls and encroaching weeds.
In its heart lay a massive, weathered stone throne, yet no one ventured near it. Through the fissures in the walls and the timeworn windows, Lumian glimpsed a night shrouded in darkness and cold, veiled by a thick fog.
Faint starlight penetrated the fog, casting a feeble glow upon the palace and the dreamlike town enshrouded by the fog.
The town appeared utterly deserted, as if plucked from a dream. Within the palace, stone candlesticks embedded in the walls flickered, bathing the surroundings in their warm, yellow flames.
At that precise moment, over a hundred figures arrived, each

attired in distinctive garments. Lumian scanned the assembly but could not yet spot Madame Hela. However, he recognized Hidden Blade Franca.

Clad in her favored assassin's garb—black robes complemented by leather armor, a hood drawn low, and a silver half-mask gracing her countenance—Franca engaged in conversation with a group of similarly attired individuals.

Yet, among them, Franca stood as the sole genuine Assassin.

Lumian didn't greet Franca. Following her instructions and the hints in Madame Hela's letter, he approached the huge stone chair.

Such a crowded gathering was no different from a marketplace. It was unlikely to form a unified communication and transaction. The gathering naturally fragmented into smaller groups. Only when there was a matter of particular significance would President Gandalf or vice presidents like Hela take their place by the massive stone chair to address the assembly.

Of course, someone could do the same if they wanted to share their intentions with the entire gathering.

Aurore had been a regular attendee at the Academy's gatherings. Their designated meeting spot nestled deep within the palace, tucked away to the left of the huge stone throne.

As Lumian advanced in that direction, he couldn't help but marvel at the mystical nature of the gathering.

After reciting the incantation, he had departed from the Rue du Rossignol safe house in the market district, only to find himself transported to this mysterious and ancient palace.

The members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society hailed from diverse corners of the Northern and Southern Continents, yet they had all managed to converge here within a specific timeframe.

Lumian had never encountered such a mystical power before, surpassing even teleportation. Only the bestowed Sowers of the Great Mother could compare.

What baffled him, however, was Franca's never sharing the method of entering the gathering. Even if they were face-to-face, he wouldn't hear it unless granted permission by Madame Hela.

But it was just reciting an incantation, wasn't it? *How could he not hear it?*

As Franca had explained, this power likely stemmed from a Sealed Artifact—an Artifact Madame Hela couldn't fully control but could employ to a certain extent.

Beyond this method of convening, the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society possessed other means, although these were established by various groups for internal or clique gatherings. For

instance, Hidden Blade Franca had set up a telegram group with select members, utilizing a miniaturized and simplified analyzer for scheduled chats.
Recalling Franca and Hela's rough descriptions of Aurore during the gatherings and forming his own assumptions, Lumian's steps grew lighter.
He believed that, given the unique and shared origin of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members, even if his sister wished to remain guarded amidst the assembly, her relaxed demeanor, akin to his interactions with her, would prevail, possibly even more prominently so.
This was a state devoid of profound secrets.
Additional figures began to manifest, their forms rapidly taking shape in the air, akin to oil paintings successfully duplicated.
Among the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, a diverse and eclectic array of disguises flourished. Some were clad in traditional iron-gray full-body armor, while others embraced vibrant red, yellow, white, and multicolored paint, transforming into clowns. A handful sported extravagant makeup veiling their true visages, resembling wicked witches from ancient folklore. Still, others adorned themselves with monstrous helmets sculpted from orange-yellow pumpkins or relied on makeshift hoods to become pale vampires with strikingly red lips. Some even chose horse-like attires that enveloped them from head to toe...
It was a spectacle more fantastical and imaginative than the masquerade balls documented in newspapers and magazines.
As Lumian strolled amidst the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's diverse members, a faint smile played on his lips. Occasionally, he would nod in acknowledgment of those who greeted him.
At last, he reached the corner housing the Academy team.
His eyes naturally swept over the code names displayed on their attires: Pettigrew, Professor, Griffin, Eagle, Bear, Headmaster, Periodic Table, Isotope...

Chapter 376: Different Teams

Pettigrew stood at just over 1.6 meters tall, his disheveled, yellow hair peeking out from under a face mask designed for performances. His right palm was encased in a flamboyant silver glove, and he wore an open brown jacket over a dark shirt.

As Lumian approached, Pettigrew stepped forward, exclaiming in surprise and delight, "Muggle, you've finally reappeared."

Lumian replied with a smile in Aurore's voice, "Something happened some time ago; it took me a while to recuperate."

"Are you alright now?" Pettigrew asked with concern.

"It's alright," Lumian replied nonchalantly, unsure of Aurore's friendship with him.

He turned his gaze to a lady sitting on the stone steps.

The woman donned a black butterfly mask, a white shirt adorned with a bow tie, and a long, dark coat. Pinned to her chest, a clearly typeset paper name tag read: "Professor."

Lumian greeted her with a smile, "Did Associate Professor not make it?"

Associate Professor was a man. A few years back, due to their shared code names, they had met in real life and became husband and wife.

Both were avid Warlocks, delving deep into the study of various spells. Aurore's grimoires contained the Weed Removal spell, courtesy of Associate Professor.

Professor's lips bore a faint hue, and her gaunt face framed her beautiful brown eyes. She simply replied, "He's occupied in the real world, playing host to guests. He couldn't spare the time. Nevertheless, my presence is akin to his; it doesn't alter matters. Muggle, what's the matter?"

Lumian smiled faintly and said, "I want to thank him for his Weed Removal spell."

"What's there to be grateful for? Could it be that your home was overrun by a large number of weeds?" Pettigrew asked curiously.

Lumian mirrored Aurore's expression as he recounted the past. His light-blue eyes darted around as he continued, "Some time ago, I encountered a plant rumored to originate from the Abyss. It not only grew at an astounding rate but also possessed remarkable vitality. It emitted anesthetic gasses and devoured humans like a man-eating flower. Whenever it surfaced, it did so in the hundreds, if not thousands. The Weed Removal spell, however, could wither them all. While it didn't annihilate them outright, it rendered them dormant for a considerable duration."

"Weed Removal works on Beyonder plants?" Professor exclaimed in

astonishment.
Lumian nodded and said, "But it's effective only against grass or vine-type plants."
These were the insights Aurore had penned in her grimoires.
It was evident she had conducted experiments with the Abyss Demon Flower of the Padre, meticulously documenting her findings with scholarly dedication, even when her condition was clearly off.
"This is an interesting discovery." Professor held Lumian's hand, delving into the intricacies of the Weed Removal spell.
Fortunately, Lumian had delved deeply into this spell and sought guidance from Franca and Madame Hela. Though he couldn't use it, his knowledge was sufficient for a conversation.
After a lengthy discussion on spells and mystical knowledge with the Academy team, Lumian suddenly sensed a looming presence, casting a shadow over his surroundings.
Raising his eyes, he beheld an immense figure.
This figure towered at an imposing 2.4 meters, draped in a plain linen robe. Its head was concealed beneath a hood, and in its grip, a formidable magic staff, capable of shattering the skulls of ordinary humans, was held.
It was none other than Gandalf, the president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. Franca had suggested that he might have reincarnated as a middle-aged man within the Feysac Empire, endowed with a giant bloodline. He had a penchant for liquor and an insatiable thirst for mystical knowledge, yet the nature of his pathway remained an enigma. Sometimes, he displayed traits of the Reader pathway, embodying characteristics of a Savant and Mystery Pryer. At other times, it made people feel that with his physical condition, it would be a pity not to take the Warrior pathway.
High-end mystical knowledge like the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility originated from Gandalf.
Oddly, Franca's expression took on a peculiar twist when mentioning Gandalf, as though his code name didn't quite align with his towering stature and imposing presence.
Gandalf, his visage obscured by an eerie shadow, fixed his gaze upon Lumian and gruffly extended a smile.
"You've missed a few gatherings. I was concerned something might have befallen you."
Lumian responded with pursed lips, his momentary sigh and helplessness hidden beneath the surface. "Something did happen, but it's been resolved."
"That's reassuring." Gandalf nodded in relief.

Following a few more courteous exchanges with Lumian, he made his way towards the other teams.
This was Lumian's first time participating in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's discussions. Following Madame Hela's counsel, he adopted a stance of speaking less and listening more. Often, he remained in silence.
Throughout this process, Lumian, now seated on the stone steps, observed those who spoke with a faint smile, projecting an aura of extreme attentiveness.
Aurore often employed a similar tactic. When conversing with Madame Pualis and the elderly ladies in Cordu, she would grace the speaker with a warm smile, making them feel truly valued. The discussion might be captivating, but beneath her apparent engagement, Aurore's thoughts would occasionally drift. She would intermittently return to grasp the essential points, safeguarding against potential awkwardness when she needed to respond.
Of course, when it came to discussions of mystical knowledge or striking deals, Lumian remained fully engaged, simply mirroring Aurore's demeanor.
After a while, Lumian found a suitable moment to rise from his spot, signaling his intention to depart from the Academy team's gathering area.
A lady, her face adorned with removable oil paint, exclaimed in surprise, "Aren't you purchasing anything today?"
Do you really need to spend a small fortune at every gathering to find joy, Grande Soeur? Lumian muttered silently and smiled.
"I have two reasons. Firstly, I've recently hit a bottleneck and am more focused on gathering the formula and ingredients for the Scrolls Professor potion..."
He spoke earnestly while analyzing the absence of corresponding requirements. Finally, he said, "Secondly, I'm broke and owe someone a substantial sum."
Members of the Academy team chuckled warmly, their understanding evident.
They had all noticed that Muggle had met with a significant problem during her hiatus from the gatherings, transforming from a well-off individual into someone burdened with debt.
However, they weren't overly concerned for Muggle. Over the past few years, they had witnessed their companion's knack for accumulating wealth.
Gracefully, Lumian made his way to the third pillar on the right of the colossal stone chair, where the Purgatory team congregated. Madame Hela frequently engaged in their discussions.

The lady was already present, albeit with a noticeable reduction in the chill that enveloped her. Under her veiled hat was a blur, revealing only a pale, yet not dismal, white complexion.
Silently, Lumian observed the discussions and dealings of the Purgatory team. After a while, he inquired thoughtfully, "Have any of you heard of an illusory river associated with the domain of death?"
Hela cast a fleeting glance at Lumian but remained silent.
Another member of the Purgatory team, a man bearing the code name Cerberus, pondered the question and responded, "Muggle, why do you ask?
"I've heard rumors of an illusory river deep within the Underworld, within the realm of hell. It's said to be connected to one of the High-Sequence Beyonders of the Corpse Collector pathway."
He actually answered without hesitation and didn't seek compensation for the intel, even though it's only hearsay and not verified fact... Lumian smiled and said, "I've recently been intrigued by the presence of such a river in both the myths and legends of our homeland and here."
He raised the topic indirectly without delving into further details.
Cerberus pondered for a moment before commenting, "This might be rooted in the commonality between the origins of myths and human thought."
Lumian tersely acknowledged with Aurore's voice and didn't inquire further.
He listened for a while longer before turning his attention to a hole in the ancient palace.
With his previous preparations in place, Lumian could smoothly blend into the April Fool's team, allowing him to eavesdrop on their conversations.
As Lumian made his way to the designated location, he quickly reviewed what he had observed and heard.
He couldn't help but notice that his sister, Aurore, had garnered quite a bit of popularity. Both the members of the Academy and the Purgatory team had shown her kindness.
While moving diagonally through the ancient palace, Lumian's attention was drawn to a man with stockings covering his head. This individual leaped onto a broken pillar and addressed the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members, who were clad in various eccentric outfits.
"Allow me to recite a poem!
"Ocean, you are all water;
"Horse, you have four legs.
"Demoness, you truly taste great!"

This isn't a poem at all... Lumian had already purchased Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles, which included jests about the Emperor having a more than friendly relationship with a Demoness. In the diary, he even commented on the taste of Demonesses.

With one step following another, Lumian approached the April Fool's team. He spotted a man with his back turned to him, dressed in a black seer's robe. Behind this figure, an ancient Feysac word was inscribed in golden paint: "Loki."

Franca had mentioned that Loki was a figure from certain legends in their world, associated with lies, mischief, and flames. This member bearing the code name 'Loki' is the founder of the April Fool's team. Although he has progressed on the paths of the divine at a pace not inferior to Hela and the others, he hasn't ascended to the position of vice president... Various pieces of information flashed through Lumian's mind.

He entered the area where the April Fool's team was, and all laughter abruptly ceased.

In unison, Loki and the others turned to face Lumian, who was clad in a half-mask and a black Warlock robe.

As Muggle, Lumian's lips curved into a radiant smile.

"Long time no see, everyone."

Chapter 377: An Earlier Transmigrator

Facing Lumian's greeting, the dozen or so members of the April Fool's team fell silent.

Among them, several people's gazes and body language gave Lumian the distinct feeling that something was amiss.

There was "Bard" wearing stockings to conceal his appearance, "Hisoka" with a half-mask, vertical red hair, and teardrop and star makeup on his face, "Mad Lady" sporting red, yellow, and white clown paint, and "Ultraman" in comical attire.

Some of these April Fool's team members appeared surprised and puzzled, while others subtly shrank back. Some narrowed their eyes, and others changed their postures, becoming even more vigilant than before.

If Lumian hadn't sought guidance from Psychiatrist Anthony Reid during this time and focused on observing the guilty's reactions when they realized their victim was still alive, he wouldn't have been able to discern these differences so clearly. He might have missed something important.

In contrast, Lumian's earlier suspects, "Loki" and "I Know Someone," had more normal reactions.

The former was the founder and leader of the April Fool's team. If anything unusual occurred within the team, the chances of him remaining unaffected were slim. According to Franca, he was believed to be a member of the Spectator pathway, possibly a Psychiatrist. However, Aurore's understanding of this pathway was notably deficient. Her grimoires didn't align with the details uncovered in the dream.

Dressed in a black circus divination-style robe, Loki obscured his face with the shadows of his hood, seemingly unconcerned about being identified.

After a brief silence, he expressed his surprise, saying, "Muggle, you've reappeared.

"I thought you lost control and went mad after hearing the Hidden Sage's cram school classes, and that's why you haven't attended any gatherings for months."

"Rap, it's rap, not cram school classes," corrected Bard with a smile.

Lumian had learned from Franca that "rap" was a strange form of music that some members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society liked to compare to the ravings of unknown entities.

Muggle's thin red lips curled up slightly in response.

"I did show signs of madness, but I managed it."

In the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, this was a common topic. Many members had lost control for various reasons, turning

into monsters or even dying. As a result, Psychiatrists could make a killing by treating their companions' psychological or mental problems during gatherings.
Dressed in a white coat and wearing a bird-beak mask, I Know Someone nodded.
"Last year, I assessed your mental and psychological state. There wasn't much of a problem, but you haven't had regular assessments in nearly a year. You need to be careful. I know someone who was careless and overconfident and ended up in an asylum."
This Psychiatrist appeared normal enough and was genuinely concerned about his patient's condition. However, his membership in the April Fool's team raised some suspicions for Lumian. At the very least, his mental state didn't seem entirely healthy.
As a prankster, Lumian didn't despair about the future or made it his life's mission to seek fun. Having such circumstances would undoubtedly put a toll on their psychological well-being.
Loki didn't press further about Muggle's absence from numerous gatherings. He spread his hands and addressed all the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society in the April Fool's team's spot.
"Everyone, I've recently come across another transmigrator from history!"
"Who is it?" Bard with stockings blurted out, and the other members turned their attention to Loki.
Taking note of everyone's gazes, Loki gestured meaningfully and continued, "I've obtained ancient texts that mention the existence of an Ancient Sun God in the Third Epoch.
"Haven't we always been puzzled by the scriptures of the various Churches, especially the Eternal Blazing Sun Church? Don't they bear a striking resemblance to the religious texts of our world?
"Now, I believe I've found the answer."
As the leader of the April Fool's team spoke, he tapped his chest four times—top, down, left, right—as if indicating a religion from his homeland.
Lumian's eyelids twitched.
Mr. K had made the same gesture while praying to that entity!
Was it merely a coincidence, or was there an inevitable connection?
Furthermore, wasn't the Ancient Sun God the father of the angel at Salle de Bal Unique?
Loki continued in an exaggerated tone, "Yes, just as you suspect. The scriptures of the various Churches are derived from the Ancient Sun God, but they have different focuses and have altered

certain details.
"I've only managed to find a few of that entity's books, but I can confirm they're from our world.
"I hope you can gather more information about the Ancient Sun God and eventually confirm that He too is a transmigrator, possibly even predating Roselle. If you wish to see the books I've obtained, remember to request a trade later. 100 grams of gold or an equivalent currency for a copy is a very reasonable price, don't you think? We're all on the same side, and this discovery holds the key to our hopes of returning home. Otherwise, I wouldn't sell it for such a small amount of gold."
The comical-looking Ultraman let out a sigh and said, "It's all rather pointless. I believe you think that this entity, who has become a deity, must have a better understanding of the world's truth than us. He might have already unraveled the secret of transmigration and the way back. But according to your information, didn't He also fail to return?"
"See the light!" Loki's lips curled up. "And I suspect that the reason that individual couldn't return is because He perished in a divine battle."
"Sounds intriguing," Hisoka, dressed in clothes with poker card patterns, suddenly chimed in.
Loki slowly scanned the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and flashed a smile.
"The information about that entity and the ancient books related to it has been deliberately erased, with only a small number of them circulating in secret. Most are hidden underground near the source of power left behind by that entity.
"It's said that in those places, the higher your Sequence, the more dangerous it becomes. It's easier to lose control. Ordinary Beyonders like us stand a chance to approach. Perhaps it holds the truth about the connection between our two worlds and a way to return to our homeland."
At this point, Loki's gaze passed over Lumian's masked face.
Is he subtly encouraging Aurore and the other members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society to venture underground? Lumian maintained his vigilance against any potential "pranks."
However, there was another reason why he sensed a potential issue instantly. Madam Justice had mentioned that the higher one's Sequence, the more dangerous it would be when approaching the Samaritan Women's Spring. She had also explained the nature of the problem.
This led Lumian to suspect that the Ancient Sun God's location mentioned by Loki might be a place similar to the Samaritan

Women's Spring. He knew firsthand how perilous and terrifying the Samaritan Women's Spring could be!
Inciting others to explore underground in their quest to return home while avoiding the risks himself, or is this merely a prank that could harm others without benefiting Loki? Lumian glanced at Loki's profile and deliberately interjected, "I've been pondering a similar question lately.
"Why do many myths and legends in this world involve an illusory river associated with the domain of death, just like in our homeland?
"Could it be the result of some senior who transmigrated back?"
Given Lumian's knowledge of Aurore, he knew she couldn't resist getting involved if she caught wind of any leads regarding returning to her hometown. Since he had questions of his own, he needed to steer the conversation away from Loki's direction. Finding a relevant topic was his best strategy.
This was a lesson Lumian and his sister had learned through their battles of wits and pranks over studies, homework, exams, combat, and pranks.
Mad Lady, adorned with red, yellow, and white clown paint, chuckled and remarked, "Human nature, my dear, humans tend to blend their own experiences into myths and legends. In ancient times, they relied on water for survival, so they believed there should be a river in the afterlife. Likewise, when they dug graves, the deeper they went, the more likely they'd encounter an underground river."
Lumian, emulating Aurore's tone, responded, "Your explanation is quite scientific, but I think it lacks mysticism. And if we aim to return, mysticism might be just what we need."
He recounted the legend of the River Styx, which he had recently acquired from the Purgatory team, and concluded, "I believe this could also be a path worth exploring."
Loki's face remained hidden in the hooded shadows as he chuckled and remarked, "Although the Underworld should be somewhere in the spirit world, I believe it must be closely related to the underground. In numerous folklores from the Northern and Southern Continents, 'hell' is often depicted as being hidden underground.
"That's why our investigation needs to be centered on the underground. Whether it's the remains of the Third Epoch's Ancient Sun God or issues related to the River Styx, we must delve deep underground to truly connect with these mysteries."
Lumian couldn't help but mutter to himself, You just want everyone to meet their end faster...

He pretended to be engaged and continued sharing information about the Ancient Sun God, underground exploration, and the River Styx with Loki, I Know Someone, and the other members of the April Fool's team.

After almost twenty minutes of conversation, Lumian decided to step away from the April Fool's team's vicinity.

He had already sensed abnormal reactions from at least four members of the April Fool's team. The next step was to leave this to Hidden Blade Franca.

If there was indeed something awry with the April Fool's team, they would be highly cautious when dealing with Muggle. They wouldn't readily engage or probe, fearing they might fall into a trap.

Their primary objective should be observation and indirect information gathering at this point.

When it came to Hidden Blade, they could play pranks without reservations. Later on, Franca could use those pranks as an excuse to locate the April Fool's team members in the real world and confront them individually. She could win the support of other members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. Whether they could extract any significant information during these confrontations remained to be seen.

As Lumian took a few steps away from the gathering, he spotted the 2.4-meter-tall president, Gandalf, approaching the massive stone chair and addressing the group with a resounding voice, "Everyone, I have something important to discuss."

Chapter 378: Investigation

Lumian halted and turned his attention toward the president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, who was dressed in a linen robe.

The nearly half-giant Gandalf didn't require mechanical contraptions or mystical techniques to project his voice throughout the ancient palace.

"I just had a conversation with Isotope and noticed a matter that deserves our attention.

"He mentioned that ever since advancing to Sequence 6, he's been encountering Beyonders more frequently and getting involved in Beyonder affairs.

"This aligns with my general observations over the past few years. You know I enjoy talking to every member and asking about the additional changes brought about by superpowers. For me, I've delved deeper into the paths of the divine than most, gaining a profound understanding.

"Having said that, I want to share a conclusion.

"There are almost no exceptions. As Beyonders progress in Sequence, the frequency of mystical matters involving them significantly increases. At Sequence 9, this phenomenon isn't prominent. But starting from Sequence 7 or even Sequence 6, even those who typically don't pay much attention to such matters will feel that they are constantly encountering Beyonder events.

"Let me illustrate with numbers. At Sequence 9, the assumed number of Beyonder incidents or encounters with other Beyonders each season is 1. This can easily slip under the radar during mysticism gatherings and small circle activities you participate in. It's challenging to pinpoint precisely. Now, at Sequence 8, it's 2. For Sequence 7, it might surge to 5 or 6. In other words, one may come across one or two Beyonder incidents or unfamiliar Beyonders once or twice a month.

"Do you have any thoughts or speculations about this phenomenon? *Can you discern the cause?* Perhaps there are fundamental laws of mysticism at play."

Lumian fell into a daze.

Isn't this the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence?

This transmigrator, code-named Gandalf, possessed a sharp investigative spirit. He was astute in noticing even the smallest details and had actually uncovered the outward signs of the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence!

He was also the one who had suggested that advancing to Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 in recent years would be easier than

before, even allowing for the direct consumption of Beyonder characteristics. He had provided a more precise assessment of the increased risk.
A research-focused talent... Lumian sighed, using Aurore's usual terminology.
For someone like him, with an evil god's angel sealed within and a deity-level aura shrouding him, the manifestation of the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence was so intense that it couldn't be ignored. Anyone would recognize the problem.
What do you mean one or two Beyonder incidents a month?
It's practically every week!
Including the Beyonders he had encountered, it could be said to be a daily occurrence!
However, at times, Lumian felt that the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence hadn't fully played its role. Only by attracting members of the Sinners organization and Roche Louise Sanson's family to Avenue du Marché and coincidentally meeting them would it qualify.
Perhaps the power of a boon wasn't as potent as the convergence of Beyonder characteristics, or perhaps Termiboros's seal had mitigated the effect. In any case, his desire remained unfulfilled.
As someone who had taken his sister's place at the gathering, Lumian refrained from approaching Gandalf directly and offering a substantial price for information on the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence.
Casually scanning the area, he noticed Madame Hela and Hidden Blade Franca remaining silent, listening to the discussions among members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society regarding this phenomenon.
Lumian knew that Franca was familiar with the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence. With Hela's concealed knowledge from her exploration of the Samaritan Women's Spring, she should have observed such a phenomenon.
They didn't explicitly mention the term "convergence" due to their different motivations. For Franca, as long as she didn't seek to ascend to godhood, immediate understanding of the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence wasn't necessary. She just needed to recognize the corresponding phenomena and avoid risks. The specific details could be sold at the gathering when she needed funds and gained Madam Judgment's approval.
As various groups engaged in fervent discussions about President Gandalf's topic, Lumian made his way toward the Academy team.
As Lumian continued on his path, he spotted Hidden Blade Franca approaching.

"Muggle? You're finally back at the gathering! I was genuinely worried something had happened to you!" Franca's expressions were slightly exaggerated, but it was well within the norm for her. In the eyes of all the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, she was known for her rich emotions and her love for interacting and experimenting.
Lumian pursed his lips and offered a smile.
"Something did come up, but it got sorted out."
Impressive mental resilience. He didn't react strongly when the Cordu disaster was mentioned. Franca looked at Muggle's exposed lower face with curiosity and asked, "What happened?"
"A mysticism catastrophe," Lumian replied, taking on a resistant demeanor.
Franca knew when to change the subject and shifted the conversation with a smile.
"Just a while ago, in the April Fool's group, Loki mentioned that he stumbled upon another ancient transmigrator known as the Ancient Sun God." Lumian took the initiative to bring up his conversation with April Fool's. "Mad Lady, Hisoka, Bard, and Ultraman are a bit skeptical."
Mad Lady, Hisoka, Bard, Ultraman... Franca and Lumian shared an unspoken understanding. She immediately grasped his intentions —take note of the four April Fool's team members Lumian suspected of being problematic.
Including Loki and I Know Someone, who were often discussed as potential suspects, there were now a total of six individuals.
"Is that true? Besides Emperor Roselle, are there other ancient transmigrators?" Franca asked with genuine excitement.
She wasn't faking it. She had always been interested in ancient transmigrators.
Seeing the opportunity, she bid Muggle farewell and approached the area in the palace where the April Fool's team was located.
Lumian returned to the Academy team and listened as Professor, Isotope, and Pettigrew discussed the mysticism experiences they had encountered.
The gathering had a strict two-hour time limit, but attendees could leave at any moment. They simply needed to recite an incantation, changing the last sentence to "I beseech your permission to leave your kingdom," and they would return to their original location.
Many members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society chose to depart early after conducting their business and sharing their concerns, to prevent any accidents from occurring in the real world. However, a significant number of members opted to stay.
For them, the opportunity to interact with people who shared their

unique origins and not worry about accidental disclosures of their secrets was a pleasure. Even if their conversations veered into trivial topics, it still improved their emotional well-being and provided relief for their mental and psychological states.
Lumian believed that his sister had found these gatherings quite relaxing. Thus, he partly attended to impersonate her and show no difference while also enjoying the atmosphere on Aurore's behalf, patiently remaining until the end.
Vaguely, he sensed that his emotions were becoming more sensitive and easily stirred. It was as if Aurore's soul fragment had risen to the surface and was affecting his psyche.
As the gathering drew to a close, Professor, wearing a shirt with a bowtie, turned her attention to Lumian and inquired, "Muggle, are you still residing in the south?"
Hmm, she's not referring to a specific country... Does she know that Aurore is in Intis? Lumian's thoughts raced as he responded candidly, "No, I've already moved to the Trier greater region."
A smile curved on Professor's lips.
"Associate Professor and I are also residing in Trier. Would you be interested in an offline gathering?"
"I'm in the Trier greater region as well," Pettigrew chimed in eagerly. Periodic Table and Isotope nodded in agreement.
An offline gathering... Aurore did occasionally go out for a few days in the past. Could she have attended a real-life gathering with Professor and the others? Different circles have different styles. Franca and her associates have a telegram group, and these individuals from the Academy participate in real-life gatherings depending on the region? Lumian pondered for a moment and replied, "Another time. After I've sorted out some personal matters."
He intentionally brought up certain personal matters, hoping that this information might reach the April Fool's suspects like Loki and Mad Lady.
"Alright." Professor and the others acknowledged. After all, Muggle had previously revealed that something had occurred to her.
...
"A Beyonder from ancient times, the ruler of the Nation of the Evernight, the noble Mother of Heaven, I beseech your permission to leave your kingdom."
With each repetition of the incantation, the figures in the ancient palace gradually faded away.
When Lumian regained consciousness, he found himself back in the safe house on Rue du Rossignol.
How magical... Compared to this, Mr. K's mysticism gatherings are like comparing my safe house to Emperor Roselle's summer

palace. They're on entirely different levels. The contrast is quite significant... Lumian sighed and returned to his original appearance.

He wasn't in a rush to write to Madam Magician to report the Armored Shadow's response or to inquire about the Ancient Sun God. Instead, after changing his clothes, he headed straight to 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches and knocked on the door of Apartment 601.

Jenna had gone to visit her brother and wouldn't return until the next morning. Franca sat in a recliner, muttering as if cursing someone.

"What's bothering you?" Lumian asked as he settled onto the divan.

"That rascal Loki. I wanted to buy some information from him, but he told me others could pay with gold, but not me," Franca replied indignantly. "He said he wanted to experience the taste of a Demoness. Damn it, why didn't he drink the potion and become a Witch himself? After I cursed him, he claimed it was a joke and sold me the ancient information."

She chuckled after recounting the encounter.

"Although there's a special barrier in the gathering venue that prevents us from tracing the ownership and location of the items we trade, the essence of the items can't be concealed. Regarding the copy of the information, it includes details such as the type of paper, which factory it originated from, the model of the mechanical typewriter or printing machine used to produce it, and even the approximate location. This could provide some clues. It might help us locate Loki in the real world. Of course, that's assuming he hasn't taken any anti-divination measures, misdirection, or hidden anything."

As Franca spoke, she took out a mirror and prepared for Magic Mirror Divination.

After reciting the incantation, the mirror darkened, accompanied by the faint sound of water.

Franca held the copy of the information she had obtained from Loki and inquired thoughtfully, "Where can we find the mechanical typewriter used to create this information?"

Within the mirror, an aged voice responded, "Trier, Alone Bar."

Chapter 379: Bold Speculation

Alone Bar? Lumian was taken aback by the answer.

Loki, the founder of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's April Fools' team, is actually in Trier and connected to the Alone Bar?

Isn't this a little too coincidental?

Lumian's impression of the Alone Bar was that it stood diagonally opposite Salle de Bal Unique. In the basement, there was a theater for marionette shows. The lighting was dim, and the colors were dark, giving it a slightly sinister appearance.

Initially, he didn't see it as a problem, but now that he knew that the monocle-wearing patrons of Salle de Bal Unique were in a superimposed state of being "Amon" and "Not Amon," he believed that the Alone Bar, which could compete with this dance hall and survive, wasn't simple.

Moreover, he had once observed Leah from Bureau 8 entering the bar. He suspected it to be Bureau 8's covert hideout, designed to keep an eye on the Amons at Salle de Bal Unique.

Could Loki also be a member of Bureau 8, a true official Beyonder?

Or was it possible that he merely resided in Quartier de l'Observatoire and recognized the uniqueness of Alone Bar? Was that why he used the mechanical typewriter there to create a copy of the information, preventing anyone from tracing it back to him?

"What's the matter?" Franca watched Lumian furrow his brow and plunge into deep thought. After a prolonged silence, she extended her right hand and waved it in front of his eyes.

Lumian contemplated for a moment and said, "There's a significant issue with this bar."

"You're familiar with this bar?" Franca looked surprised.

This man appeared to harbor many secrets she was unaware of!

A soft chuckle escaped Lumian's lips.

"We'll need to start with Madame Hela and me searching for the Samaritan Women's Spring."

Franca was taken aback. "How many times do I need to have you give out every detail? Are you a tube of toothpaste, giving out a little with each squeeze?"

"The focus was on the situation at the Samaritan Women's Spring, and this all happened along the way," Lumian explained, without feeling embarrassed.

Starting from his encounter with the Islander swindler, Monette, and his repeated scares, he connected Charlie being swindled, the uniqueness of Salle de Bal Unique, and Madam Magician's

connection to Amon. Finally, he mentioned that Alone Bar was diagonally opposite Salle de Bal Unique, and an official member of Bureau 8 had once entered and exited.
Franca felt like she was listening to a ghost story. She subconsciously wanted to hug a pillow, but there was none on the recliner.
Quickly shaking off her daze, she straightened her back, trying to maintain an expression that suggested a "true man" wouldn't be frightened by such a terrifying incident.
All this was used to torment Jenna!
After Lumian finished speaking, Franca hissed and said, "You've had quite the array of experiences. You've even encountered an old monster that only exists in horror stories."
"Why didn't you warn me earlier? That Islander swindler shows up in the market district from time to time. What if I run into him one day?"
"It's for your own safety. If you didn't suspect anything when you encountered him, he wouldn't pay you any attention. But now, if your demeanor changes when you see him, he might become suspicious and involve you in his Parasitism," Lumian warned, half-scaring Franca.
"That's true." Franca gritted her teeth and added, "The next time I meet him, I'll pray for the angel's protection from Mr. Fool when I get home!"
She pushed aside her fear of the Amons and steered the conversation back to the main topic.
"This all ties into the Alone Bar. Investigating it in the future is going to be very challenging..."
Franca suddenly had an imaginative guess.
"Do you think Loki has already been parasitized by an Amon?"
Lumian struggled to follow Franca's train of thought and responded, "Huh?"
Franca continued, her tone grave, "Consider this. The books and legends of the Ancient Sun God have been missing for two to three thousand years, and since the Churches of the Seven Gods' bibles are copied from Him, they must have erased relevant information. How did Loki come by this information?
"While there are various possibilities, if he is indeed Amon, it would make sense. No one knows His father's situation better than Him.
"As a child of a transmigrator, not to mention that He can obtain Loki's memories through Parasitism, even if He can't, He can perfectly act as our companion. You also mentioned that He enjoys deceit and has frightened you a few times. This is very similar to

Loki's usual behavior.
"And when Amon from Salle de Bal Unique created the duplicate, he deliberately went to the Alone Bar diagonally opposite to use a mechanical typewriter to mislead potential tracing. This also fits with this style."
Franca's bold imagination surprised Lumian. After a moment of thought, he responded, "This does explain why this information oddly points to the Alone Bar.
"Under the guidance of this evil angel, the April Fool's team gradually felt despair for the future and pursued their own joy. It was a reasonable development for them to start targeting other members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.
"However, Amon wouldn't intentionally lead the information to the Alone Bar, as that would naturally make investigators suspect Him, who resides diagonally opposite...
"Perhaps He anticipated the investigators' thoughts," Franca countered.
Lumian shook his head slowly.
"If it were Amon, your divination would have been misled or you wouldn't have received an answer.
"Yes, regardless, this is indeed a possibility. I plan to visit the Alone Bar for a drink in the next two days and investigate the situation on the ground, but I won't delve further."
Franca acknowledged his words tersely and sighed.
"In truth, I also realize that the likelihood of Loki being parasitized by an Amon is very low. Our primary purpose in attending the gathering is to transition into a special state. In this state, the Sealed Artifact borrowed from Madame Hela should be able to detect any abnormalities in each member's bodies. It won't transform the corresponding object and leave it where it is.
"Sigh, I'm just finding excuses for myself. It's not wise for us to pursue Loki without substantial evidence and strong suspicion.
"It makes me feel like I've betrayed the Research Society and my companions. That's why I hope that Loki was indeed parasitized by Amon. That way, I won't experience a similar sense of guilt. I'd be helping the Research Society eliminate hidden dangers."
Filtering abnormalities in the body by entering a special state and attending the gathering? But nothing happened to Termiboros... Lumian wondered if it was because Mr. Fool's seal was unique or if Madame Hela's Sealed Artifact lacked the ability to filter abnormalities and guard against parasitic angels like Amon.
However, he didn't voice any objections at the moment and instead smiled.
"In my view, there's definitely something amiss with Loki. It's just

a question of whether it's a major or minor issue.
"When he sold you the information, did he encourage you to explore the underground and seek out more remnants of the Ancient Sun God?"
"He did," Franca confirmed. "He also mentioned that in such places, the higher the Sequence, the more dangerous it is. It's easier to lose control. Only Low-Sequence Beyonders like us can approach it."
"That's only a relative perspective. Did you find it dangerous when I explored the Samaritan Women's Spring earlier?" Lumian inquired.
"It was extremely dangerous," Franca acknowledged, knowing much about the matter.
And you don't even know that the Blood Emperor's apparition nearly caught me... Lumian muttered, "Searching for the remnants of the Ancient Sun God will likely be even more dangerous.
"If Loki doesn't make an attempt, he'll be essentially using you as cannon fodder by encouraging you to explore underground. And if he does try, he'll inevitably be corrupted and gradually mutate. He lacks the purification of a great existence like Mr. Fool.
"So, it's crucial to locate Loki as soon as possible. It's in both your and his best interests."
Franca bit her lip and agreed, "You're right. Loki clearly has malicious intentions in this matter. The other members of the April Fool's team might be curious and willing to participate, but I believe they're cooperating with him."
After persuading Franca, Lumian asked curiously, "Tell me, the prerequisite for entering the gathering is to enter a special state. What state is it?"
Franca, no longer hesitating, shared eagerly, "I've asked my Major Arcana card holder about it before. Although I couldn't reveal the incantation or provide a detailed description of the gathering, she speculated that it involves a 'Concealment' power based on my description and its effects."
"Concealment" power... Lumian nodded.
It was indeed well-concealed. Even the incantation had been hidden, preventing anyone from discovering it.
Franca went on, "The power of Concealment is associated with the Evernight pathway, which is the divine pathway controlled by the Evernight Goddess Church."
She lowered her voice and added, "I suspect that Madame Hela is affiliated with the Church of Evernight."
"Similar to 007?" Lumian inquired. He hadn't encountered 007 today, as too many people had participated in the gathering, and he didn't know the usual attire or team of 007.
Franca tersely confirmed his assumption.

"Something along those lines, but she may hold a more significant position. She's at a higher level and has access to more concealed knowledge."

Recalling Madame Hela's actions in obtaining the Samaritan Women's Spring, Lumian couldn't help but agree with Franca's assessment.

Indeed, the lady possessed a wealth of secret knowledge. Moreover, she wore a black diamond ring that clearly exceeded ordinary mystical items and was suspected to possess godlike powers.

Additionally, the Sealed Artifact she had borrowed to convene the gathering was beyond Lumian's imagination.

In a casual manner, Lumian asked, "What are the primary manifestations of the Evernight pathway's powers?"

According to Aurore's grimoires, the first three Sequences of this pathway were Sleepless, Midnight Poet, and Nightmare. They primarily involved enhancing spirituality, increasing mental strength, reducing the need for sleep, the mystical application of poetry, and the unique ability to induce sleep in others.

Franca thought for a moment and replied, "The power of Concealment, command over spirits, and the ability to create realistic dreams..."

Realistic dream... Lumian was taken aback by the answer.

He couldn't help but recall the realistic dream he had experienced in the ruins of Cordu.

Chapter 380: Bell Chimes

At the conclusion of the Cordu disaster, Lumian found himself not only grappling with the seal within his body and the fading aura of Inevitability surrounding him, but he had also been thrust into a vivid, lifelike dream. Surprisingly, even the investigators, Ryan and the others, succumbed to an uncontrollable slumber as they entered a specific area, becoming entangled in his dream.

During that time, Lumian, who was still unfamiliar with the intricacies of mysticism, failed to sense anything amiss. It was only later, when he enlisted the help of Mr. Poet to decipher the symbolic meanings woven into the dream, that he realized its origins were not tied to Termiboros's power or Mr. Fool's seal. It had a different source, one that conveyed protection and solace.

Ever since that moment, Lumian had tirelessly pondered the origin of this lifelike dream, but he had never unearthed a definitive answer. The possibilities were endless. However, with Franca's detailed account of the Evernight pathway and his own experiences at the gathering, a sudden revelation struck him.

The Evernight pathway, known for inducing nightmarish visions, could also weave the fabric of realistic dreams!

Could it be that Madame Hela, upon learning of Aurore's tragic fate in Cordu, had arrived too late to intervene directly? Perhaps she had resorted to employing the power of a Sealed Artifact to draw me into the lifelike dream, an attempt to provide solace for my tormented soul?

No, there's no need for her to hide this from me and feign ignorance. What's there to hide?

Moreover, if she were responsible, there would be no lingering traces of slumbering power left behind...

Could it be that the continuous use of the incantation involving Concealment powers during the gatherings somehow marked or corrupted Aurore with the Sealed Artifact's influence? When her body disintegrated, the Sealed Artifact sensed the disturbance and, albeit unsuccessfully in saving her, led me into the realm of this lifelike dream?

Yes, it makes sense. Leah and the others were compelled to slumber on the blood-colored mountain peak, situated near the sacrificial ground, close to the three-headed, six-armed giant. This aligns with my theory. The source of the dream's power is intricately tied to Aurore's fate...

Franca observed Lumian's prolonged silence, realizing he was deeply engrossed in contemplation. She wisely refrained from interrupting, allowing him to return to the present before gently

inquiring, "What thoughts have crossed your mind?"
"Do you recall the Cordu disaster I mentioned? There's an area around the sacrificial ground, which became the blood-colored mountain peak. Anyone who ventured into it fell into a deep slumber and experienced a realistic dream," Lumian explained succinctly.
The more Franca absorbed his words, the more astonishment and trepidation filled her.
"Could it be that there's something wrong with Madame Hela too?"
"I don't think so." Lumian shook his head in response and outlined the crucial aspects of his conjecture.
Relief washed over Franca, and she couldn't hide her emotions.
"This theory does seem to fit the circumstances."
"Right, did you notice? The initial part of the incantation features a three-line honorific name. This implies that the Sealed Artifact either possesses characteristics of a living entity or was once alive. It's reasonable for it to instinctively influence those who beseech its power."
After careful consideration, Lumian recognized the validity of this point.
The two of them continued their conversation, ultimately deciding that Lumian should find a suitable time to pay a visit to the Alone Bar.
...
Returning to the Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian drew the curtains and settled at the table. Bathed in the soft glow of the carbide lamp, he began composing a letter addressed to Madam Magician.
The letter primarily centered around the Armored Shadow's performance and its response. Lumian was particularly interested in gathering information about the Ancient Sun God and its connection with the Aurora Order.
However, mindful of the late hour, he decided to wait until he "naturally" woke up in the morning, had his breakfast, and then sent the letter.
At noon, Lumian received a reply from Madam Magician, and he felt a sense of satisfaction for having purposely returned to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré.
"The Armored Shadow's response and its current condition offer us valuable insights into the situation regarding ____."
Lumian was taken aback by the first sentence.
His gaze fixated on the blank portion of the sentence, uncertain whether Madam Magician had intentionally injected humor into her letter or if some form of distortion had affected the message.
Drawing from his knowledge of Magician, Lumian's initial

assumption was that she had initially composed the entire sentence but later realized that certain information couldn't be disclosed at this moment. Instead of redacting it or starting anew, she had employed some mystical means to erase the phrase.

Why can't I be privy to this information? It's merely another world, right? Lumian mused as he proceeded to read the subsequent sentence.

"While this is a valuable acquisition, its immediate utility may be limited, though Mr. Hanged Man will undoubtedly be pleased.

"In due time, when he deems it appropriate, he might get you to summon the Armored Shadow once more. He will be responsible for providing compensation in gold for the chance to pose inquiries.

"Let him determine the questions. Your role is to facilitate the communication, and the Two of Cups will handle translation. Oh, and do not forget to request a reward from Mr. Hanged Man."

Mr. Hanged Man... Lumian repeated the code name, his eyes continuing to scan the contents of the letter.

"The Ancient Sun God's problem is complicated, and my knowledge on the matter is limited. At this juncture, I can only offer this: He was the ruler of the Third Epoch, the one who brought an end to the tyrannical reign of the brutal ancient gods and ushered in an era of light for humanity.

"The entity revered by the Aurora Order maintains a complicated connection with Him. Understanding this connection carries risks. Consider Him as the inheritor of half of His legacy, while the other portion is shared among select members of the seven deities. This division directly gave rise to what we commonly term the Age of the Gods, also known as the Fourth Epoch."

If remnants of history, legends, documents, and artifacts were still available from the Fourth Epoch, the prior Third and Second Epochs existed mostly within the scriptures of various Churches, veiled in almost mythical obscurity. Lumian possessed only scant knowledge, recognizing the Third Epoch as the Cataclysm Epoch and the Second Epoch as the Dark Epoch.

In Madam Magician's words, Lumian sensed the majesty and allure of ancient history unfolding before him.

The brutal ancient gods, the Ancient Sun God who ended humanity's dark age, the ruler of the Third Epoch whose demise remains shrouded in mystery, and the Age of the Gods that emerged from His corpse...

Why would such an ancient deity give birth to someone like Amon? And who is Amon's mother? Could there be a connection between Amon and the figure revered by the Aurora Order? The

more Lumian contemplated this, the more he discerned problems with the Ancient Sun God's method of raising offspring.
He harbored a favorable impression of this deity, not only because of His role in ending the dominion of the ancient gods and offering humanity a glimmer of hope, but also due to the suspicion that He might be an earlier transmigrator from the same world as Aurore and Emperor Roselle.
Simultaneously, Lumian began to understand why Mr. K and the Aurora Order held such vehement disdain for heretics. The one they revered was the rightful heir to the legacy of the Ancient Sun God.
A flame erupted, igniting the letter in Lumian's hand.
He tidied up and fastened the silver Lie earring, making subtle adjustments to his appearance to ensure he bore no resemblance to Lumian Lee.
With that done, he removed Lie and slipped it into a concealed pocket.
His recent insights indicated that his transfigurations from Lie wouldn't end when he was separated from Lie. It was a flesh-and-blood reconstruction. If he wanted to return to his original state, he had to use Lie to adjust it again.
Lumian grabbed his satchel and left Auberge du Coq Doré.
On his way to Avenue du Marché, he heard the chime of a bell, signaling that it was 1 p.m.
Lumian retrieved the golden pocket watch he had borrowed from Salle de Bal Brise and synchronized it with the distant tolling of the bell.
The pocket watch would lose a minute every few days.
After a journey of more than half an hour, Lumian arrived at Rue Ancienne.
His steps led him toward the Alone Bar, and his gaze naturally drifted across Salle de Bal Unique.
At that moment, the establishment had yet to see many customers. Three guards, each sporting a monocle over their right eyes, lounged in various corners, engaged in sporadic conversations or drifting into daydreams.
A postman in a distinctive blue uniform adorned with floral patterns parked his bicycle by the roadside and approached Salle de Bal Unique's mailbox, clutching a stack of letters.
Like the guards, he too wore a monocle on his right eye.
An inexplicable shiver coursed through Lumian's scalp, prompting him to avert his gaze and continue his course into the Alone Bar.
Inside, the dimly lit atmosphere persisted, casting a shadowy ambiance even at noon. At present, Lumian found himself the sole

patron.
The bartender stationed behind the bar counter was not the same individual as before. Instead, it was Leah, the Bureau 8 investigator, whom Lumian recognized!
She was attired in a white shirt, a bow tie, and a black knee-length dress. Her hair had been elegantly tied into a simple bun, adorned with tiny silver bells—a departure from her previous appearance, exuding a distinct charm.
"Gin on the rocks," Lumian stated as he settled onto a barstool at the counter, tapping the surface lightly.
A chuckle escaped him as he continued, "Why do we have a new bartender?"
Leah cast a playful glance in his direction and quipped, "Monsieur, there's no strict rule that dictates a bar must employ only one bartender. That would surely lead to their exhaustion."
"Fair enough," Lumian agreed, paying eight licks for his drink and patiently awaiting the arrival of his iced gin.
After savoring his beverage for nearly ten minutes, he casually inquired, "Is there a typewriter available here? I've just remembered a document I need to complete."
Leah, wiping a glass, responded, "In the room next to the theater in the cellar, there's a typewriter reserved for scripts. It costs 2 licks and 1 coppet for each sheet of paper."
"That's quite pricey..." Lumian muttered as he rose and entered the cellar with his glass of gin.
He steered clear of the marionette theater, harboring some lingering unease from his previous encounter. Instead, he ventured into a nearby room.
There was indeed a brass mechanical typewriter here, and a man engrossed in reading a newspaper beside it.
Lumian, in line with his prior preparations, proceeded to type out a brief document.
Some of the worn letters on the typewriter matched the information provided by Loki with uncanny precision.
Satisfied with his work, Lumian offered payment to the silent man for his use of the typewriter and paper before promptly exiting the somewhat eerie basement room.
As he returned to the bar's lobby, he was abruptly met with fugue, as he heard the faint chime of a bell.
Lumian swiftly regained his composure and directed his gaze towards Leah, noticing that she displayed no signs of alarm or surprise.
"Did you hear the bell?" Lumian inquired, placing his glass on the bar counter.

Leah furrowed her brow. "The hour has not yet struck. Why would the bell toll?"

Suppressing his bewilderment, Lumian finished his drink and departed the Alone Bar.

While passing Salle de Bal Unique, he observed that only two guards with monocles remained stationed at the entrance. The postman was conspicuously absent.

Without further ado, Lumian continued down the street, putting distance between himself and the establishment.

As he boarded a public carriage headed back to the market district, the clock chimed two o'clock with impeccable precision. Instinctively, Lumian retrieved his pocket watch, opening it to check the time.

To his astonishment, the pocket watch, which he had meticulously calibrated just an hour earlier, had once again slowed down.

A minute slow.

Chapter 381: Elimination

Lumian carefully examined the pocket watch, ensuring that there were no mechanical issues.

He hadn't bumped or jostled it in the past hour, so there should be no reason for it to malfunction.

Ever since I calibrated my pocket watch, the only odd occurrence had been the fugue state and the faint ringing of a bell when I left the Alone Bar. Additionally, there is one less monocle-wearing guard at the entrance of Salle de Bal Unique. Could there be a connection between these events and the sudden one-minute slowdown of my pocket watch? Lumian pondered this seriously, trying to come up with possible explanations.

He planned to write and inquire with Madam Magician once he returned to the market district.

Normally, he wouldn't bother his Major Arcana card holder with such minor issues, but the pocket watch's abnormality had likely started on Rue Ancienne. Moreover, there had been changes in Salle de Bal Unique's Amons. These were reasons to be cautious.

Lumian stowed his pocket watch away. When the public carriage came to a stop, he swiftly disembarked and turned into a nearby street, keeping a vigilant eye on the people and animals passing by.

He changed public carriages three times, each leading to different destinations, attempting to identify and elude any potential pursuers.

This was the self-cultivation of a Hunter.

After completing this elaborate process, Lumian entered a department store. He placed the satchel containing the Flog boxing gloves in a public washroom cubicle, put on his Lie earring, and reverted to his original appearance.

He also swapped his brown jacket for a dark vest that he had kept in his satchel, transforming himself back into Ciel Dubois as he returned to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Lumian breathed a sigh of relief after sending the letter to Madam Magician, detailing his experiences with the fugue state, the faint bell chimes, and the alterations in Salle de Bal Unique's guards.

Whenever he visited Rue Ancienne, even though he never encountered a genuine disaster, he always felt an unsettling and inexplicable fear gripping his heart.

The puppet messenger swiftly returned with a reply from Madam Magician.

"Your instincts are keen and accurate.

"The fugue you experienced and the bell chimes you heard were

the result of Mr. Fool's Angel of Time. He located his target and obliterated Salle de Bal Unique along with all the Amons in Trier. The reason your pocket watch slowed down by a minute was also a consequence of this clash.

"In the near future, you needn't concern yourself with what Amon might do to you. Nevertheless, you should be aware that dealing with such a Mythical Creature is far from simple, and they cannot be completely annihilated. There are still numerous Amons lurking in the various countries of the Northern and Southern Continents, and a few might even be concealed beneath Trier, beyond the reach of angelic powers."

As Lumian read Madam Magician's response, he was momentarily stunned.

That brief fugue he had experienced indicated a battle on an angelic scale?

Had he not recently calibrated his pocket watch, he might not have gathered any substantial evidence!

And if it weren't for the angelic Termiboros sealed within him, he might have suffered the same fate as Leah—unable to hear the bell or even be in a fugue state!

Is this the might of an angel? The confrontation between the Angel of Time and Amon had not affected the ordinary people in the vicinity. Otherwise, the residents of Rue Ancienne would have died without even realizing it...

The pocket watch had fallen a minute behind... During my momentary fugue, an angel-level battle had unfolded... The Angel of Time, Mr. Fool's Angel of Time, possesses true mastery over time...

Once one crosses the threshold into divinity, their array of abilities take on a mystical quality. The Circle Inhabitant's repetitive loop, the Concealment power of the Evernight pathway, Madam Magician's Door of Starlight, and now the Angel of Time's bell chimes—all of these surpass my wildest imagination... For the first time, Lumian didn't long for the power of a High-Sequence Beyonder solely to resurrect his sister.

It was an innate yearning.

Lumian's spirits lifted at the prospect of no longer living in fear of Amons suddenly emerging from the shadows and thrusting him into peril. He offered genuine praise to Mr. Fool and the Angel of Time, as well as his Major Arcana card holder, Madam Magician.

With a sense of relief, he incinerated the reply and made his way to Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca was waiting for his return with information about the Alone Bar and Loki.

"Good news and bad news. Which one do you want to hear?" he inquired, still grinning, as he closed the door.
Franca sized him up.
"You seem rather cheerful...
"The good news is that you've found leads on Loki?
"The bad news is that we lack the strength to continue investigating?"
"Neither." Lumian seized Franca's reclining chair.
Franca was taken aback. She hadn't expected Lumian to be so shameless.
Before Franca could voice her surprise, Lumian continued, "The good news is that Mr. Fool's Angel of Time has taken action. Salle de Bal Unique and all of Trier's Amons have been wiped out. If Loki shows up at the next gathering, it means he hasn't been Parasitized by an Amon."
"The bad news is that the copy of the information you bought was indeed created using a mechanical typewriter in the cellar of the Alone Bar. However, we can't continue our investigation while in Bureau 8's territory. I'm quite certain that it's Bureau 8's stronghold."
Leah was already working there as a bartender.
Franca's expression shifted between excitement and concern.
"Did you see Mr. Fool's Angel of Time? But why didn't I sense any obvious developments in Trier...
"Indeed, whether Loki is a member of Bureau 8 or not, asking directly about anyone who has recently used that mechanical typewriter will result in us being targeted by Bureau 8. And finding an excuse to use that typewriter to attempt divination with the last user might point to some members of Bureau 8 or even saints.
"There must be a High-Sequence Beyonder overseeing Bureau 8's stronghold diagonally opposite Salle de Bal Unique!"
Franca, her attention diverted to serious matters, forgot to ask Lumian to leave her exclusive seat.
Lumian recounted the minute delay in his pocket watch and Madam Magician's reply, leaving Franca amazed and fascinated.
After mentioning the Angel of Time, Lumian pondered for a moment and said, "Loki didn't conceal his appearance well at the gathering. I suspect he possesses abilities similar to Niese Face or Lie."
Franca nodded.
"If he's truly an official member of Bureau 8, I believe he's a Beyonder of the Seer pathway. He's at least a Sequence 6 Faceless. Your Lie corresponds to this Sequence. Yes, many Beyonders in Bureau 8 are from the Seer pathway."

Above Magician is Faceless? After Lumian obtained Lie, he suspected that it belonged to the Seer pathway, but he didn't know the corresponding Sequence name.
"That's right. This pathway becomes bizarre and difficult to kill after Sequence 7 Magician. It excels at transformations. At Sequence 5, its abilities are even more terrifying. It can silently turn a person into a puppet without a sense of self. Its name is Marionettist." Franca, who had entered the world of mysticism and joined the Tarot Club earlier than Lumian, clearly possessed more information about the pathways of the divine.
After Lumian conversed with Franca about the Seer pathway, the two of them fell into a dilemma about how to find Loki in reality.
Just then, brisk footsteps echoed upstairs before Jenna opened the door to Apartment 601.
She glanced at Lumian, who was sitting in the recliner, and Franca, who was standing beside him, and asked in confusion, "What are you guys talking about?"
"We're pondering over a conundrum," Lumian clarified, informing Jenna that he and Franca were in trouble tracking an enemy with the code name Loki. Finally, he asked, "Any ideas?"
Jenna shook her head in amusement. "You've rejected all the solutions I can think of."
Without waiting for her companions to speak, she said thoughtfully, "Ciel, put yourself in Loki's shoes. Think of yourself as someone who likes to tease others. Think of everything that happened from their perspective and see if you can find any clues. Don't you also like pranks? You should have something in common with them."
My pranks are quite different from theirs... Lumian didn't say it out loud. He tried to recall his motives, thoughts, and changes in mentality during the pranks to analyze the actions and motives of the April Fool's team.
After a moment, he furrowed his brow.
"All pranks are meant to bring joy when the target is embarrassed or suffers a blow. Those people used my sister as a target for pranks, but they can't confirm the final outcome, so it's difficult for them to obtain true joy...
"Similarly, how are they going to track Franca's movements and witness her tragic end by instigating her to explore the underground? You have to know that even if Franca never goes to the mysticism gathering again, she might have encountered an accident due to something else."
The three people in the room pondered this question.
If a prankster failed to witness the end of a prank, they would lack

a sense of accomplishment and the expected joy. How could Loki and the others determine Aurore or Franca's encounter?
After a while, Lumian said in a deep voice, "Either the prank is a cover-up, and they have an ulterior motive, or they have a way to monitor the corresponding target."
Franca suddenly felt a chill down her spine and subconsciously surveyed the room.
"What way?" Jenna asked on her behalf.
Lumian shook his head slowly. "I don't know. This might be a lead."
Amidst the alternations between silence and discussion, the three of them couldn't come up with an answer, so they could only put this matter aside for the time being.
On his way back to Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian gazed at the afternoon sun and probed, "Temiboros, can I find Loki through the Prophecy Spell?"
Termiboros's magnificent voice resounded, "After you left Rue Ancienne, if you hadn't done any anti-tracking, you would have encountered Loki."

Chapter 382: Seizing the Opportunity

If I hadn't used anti-tracking, I would have encountered Loki? Lumian was taken aback by Termiboros's response.

All he wanted to know was whether the Prophecy Spell would work against Seer pathway Beyonders. It didn't matter if Termiboros answered or not. As a Contractee, he could answer his own question and acquire a bottle of Prophetic Concoction to test its effects. To his surprise, the Inevitability angel did provide an answer.

Lumian's mind raced as he dissected the information in that sentence.

After leaving Rue Ancienne, Loki had been tailing him for some time!

The source of the copied information had been a trap!

This noon, Loki had been at the Alone Bar!

He deliberately chose the Alone Bar's mechanical typewriter to make a copy of the information. His plan was that anyone chasing him would discover it, allowing him to start tracking the other party, aiming for a lethal strike.

And if the pursuer turned out to be formidable, he could ensure his basic safety by being inside Bureau 8's stronghold. He wouldn't be easily discovered. He could even manipulate Bureau 8, an official organization, to go after the other party.

With this in mind, Lumian felt a mixture of regret and relief.

Regrettably, he hadn't spotted Loki's pursuit after leaving Rue Ancienne until the anti-tracking process was finished. This meant he had "missed" the founder of the April Fool's team. He could have had the chance to discuss Muggle-related matters with him.

But Lumian was also relieved because he wasn't prepared. If he had discovered Loki and was forced to act prematurely, there was a high chance he would have met a tragic end. After all, according to Franca's description, a Sequence 7 Magician possessed many bizarre abilities. As a Marionettist, they could silently eliminate others.

If Loki had launched a surprise attack, Lumian wasn't sure if he would have had the opportunity to use Mr. K's finger. He also wasn't sure if he could have located the real Loki in time and escaped with the Spell of Harrumph.

However, at this moment, regret outweighed relief in his heart.

Lumian's pace toward Salle de Bal Brise involuntarily slowed. He recalled his experience at the Alone Bar at noon.

The bar was dimly lit, and it was well past lunchtime. Besides a couple of inebriated patrons chatting by the window, Leah,

disguised as a bartender, appeared to be the only one on the first floor.
From the cellar, which doubled as a marionette theater, he could occasionally hear conversations from different people.
In the room with the mechanical typewriter, a man was reading a newspaper. He remained silent, his gaze fixed on the newspaper. Even when collecting the typing fee, he merely nodded...
Which one of them was Loki? Lumian stopped diagonally across from Salle de Bal Brise, his gaze unfocused.
Clearly, Leah couldn't be Loki. It wasn't due to gender differences but rather her lack of Sequence. According to Franca, Loki had a habit of revealing his appearance as of last year or even earlier. It was suspected that he had advanced to Faceless, and Leah was only a Sequence 7 Magician a few months ago.
In the lifelike dream, she likely couldn't conceal her specific Sequence.
Lumian's suspicion gradually settled on the man who was engrossed in reading the newspaper and watching the typewriter.
He has the ability to use the mechanical typewriter to duplicate information at will. It would be easy for him to notice if any strangers borrowed the typewriter...
Lumian carefully recalled the man's appearance and realized he was entirely unremarkable. He was in his thirties, with black hair, blue eyes, and an average appearance, dressed in a plain black suit like any common clerk.
Moreover, a Marionettist can create marionettes. The man might just be one of those marionettes, not Loki, which is why he remained silent and pretended to read the newspaper...
But if a Marionettist can control people, can they also turn rats, cockroaches, bedbugs, and other creatures into marionettes?
In that case, the possibilities are endless. Every living thing in the Alone Bar could potentially be Loki...
How could I ever hope to find him? What a vexing individual. Though his manifestations differed from those of the Amons, they are equally vexing!
It's only thanks to the angel trapped within me, Mr. Fool's seal, and the Blood Emperor's aura that I could evade a Marionettist—a Seer Beyonder—so far. Relying solely on anti-tracking and Lie likely wouldn't be enough to escape Loki's grasp...
How frustrating. The Alone Bar is Bureau 8's stronghold. I can't simply flush the real Loki out with a broad sweep... The more Lumian contemplated it, the more exasperated he became.
Having successfully eluded pursuit, it seemed nearly impossible to bait Loki with a similar ploy. Anyone with a modicum of

intelligence would smell a trap in this recurring situation.
What's worse, frequent visits to the Alone Bar would undoubtedly attract Bureau 8's attention, further complicating matters.
Lumian took a deep breath, exhaling slowly, forcing himself to regain his composure.
He concentrated on his analysis of Loki.
According to Anthony's theory, Loki and most members of the April Fool's team have high opinions of themselves. Otherwise, after experiencing despair for the future, they wouldn't seek solace in pranks. They would indulge in their desires and the pleasures of life...
Is it possible to lure such a person into a trap they believe they had outsmarted?
Lumian dismantled and reassembled various pieces of information in his mind, searching for a viable solution.
His frustration grew, and he longed to storm into the Alone Bar and eliminate everyone except Leah.
Then, an idea struck Lumian.
While it might not form a direct plan against Loki, it could serve as a means to probe the situation at the Alone Bar, uncover exploitable details, and gather information. Additionally, it would provide an outlet for his emotions and anger, and perhaps even earn him some money.
After careful consideration, Lumian turned around and made his way towards Rue Anarchie.
...
Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 401.
Lumian pushed open the unlatched door, where he found the bankrupt merchant, Fitz, sitting at a wooden table, dipping a long, stick-like rye bread into a thick, sticky soup.
Fitz glanced back, placing the food aside, and stood up, clearly confused and somewhat panicked.
"Monsieur Ciel, what's the matter?"
The bankrupt merchant's brown hair appeared greasy, yet he stubbornly maintained a semblance of tidiness. His dark-brown eyes and smile lines gave him a naturally ingratiating appearance.
In contrast to their previous encounter, Fitz's clothes now bore a bit of dirt, as if he hadn't had the time to clean them.
Lumian cut to the chase, his tone blunt.
"Can you provide evidence that Timmons owes you 100,000 verl d'or? The owner of Salle de Bal Unique."
Fitz's eyes lit up.
"Yes! I have a contract for our joint venture. It clearly states that he agreed to repurchase his shares within a specified time frame,

along with paying me 100,000 verl d'or and the corresponding profits.
"Monsieur Ciel, you don't need to use Salle de Bal Unique to jog my memory about Timmons. I curse that scoundrel a hundred times a day!
"Monsieur Ciel, do you believe there's a chance of recovering my money?"
Lumian's lips curled up.
"This could be your once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. If you miss it, you may never see that money again."
Salle de Bal Unique was at its most vulnerable!
Without the Amons, it was now inhabited solely by humans with varying degrees of mutation!
Fitz was a mix of excitement and apprehension upon hearing this. He hastily retrieved the valuable contract and handed it over to Lumian.
While he didn't entirely trust the mob leader, he had no choice but to place his hopes in him, praying that Lumian would return with good news.
...
Quartier de l'Observatoire, Rue Ancienne.
Lumian changed his appearance and clothes. He walked towards Salle de Bal Unique in a shirt, vest, top hat, and thin formal suit.
He encountered a guard sporting a monocle on his right eye and dressed in a short black suit, who obstructed his path.
"Monsieur, you must wear a monocle to enter our dance hall."
Lumian responded with a smile.
"Monette introduced me here. He mentioned that I don't need to wear a monocle on my right eye, like you gentlemen."
The two guards exchanged meaningful glances and exchanged knowing smiles.
"Then it's not an issue."
From their appearances, it seems they are well aware of the consequences of being invited by Monette. They might even have been influenced by Monette's devious personality and secretly are faithful to Amon. Unfortunately, they remain oblivious to the fact that Salle de Bal Unique is no longer the same as they remembered. Lumian sneered inwardly and decided to seek out someone most resembling Amon later, intent on shattering their monocle with a punch.
This act was both a release of his pent-up anger and fear from being manipulated and intimidated by Amon, and a means to catch the attention of the Alone Bar. After all, how would they know that someone could reclaim the money from Timmons?

It was already evening, and gas wall lamps and stained-glass chandeliers illuminated Salle de Bal Unique's dance hall.
Dancers in monocles and short suits swayed on the dance floor while others leaned against the railings with glasses of wine, wearing smiles as they observed others dancing. Musicians played violins and the clarinet in one corner, contributing to the lively atmosphere.
It appeared as though nothing unusual had occurred here.
After observing for a while, Lumian made his way to the stairs leading to the second floor.
The guard with a monocle, stationed at the top of the stairs, extended his right hand to block Lumian's path.
He asked with an inscrutable smile, "Who are you here to see?"
Lumian maintained a relaxed demeanor as he replied, "I'm here to collect some debts from Timmons."
"Then you can't proceed upstairs," the monocled guard retorted, his tone almost amused, as if he were witnessing a comedy.
Lumian's lips curled into a radiant smile.
Bang!
His left fist connected with the guard's face, sending the monocle flying. It crashed to the ground with a resounding crack.

Chapter 383: "Forced Storming"

Amidst the sound of the monocle falling and sliding, the guard tilted his head, surprise and confusion crossing his face.

His reaction was rather bizarre. He didn't react with anger or call for backup. It was as though he considered what had just happened a part of some performance filled with mystery.

Lumian passed by with a smile, heading up the stairs without a second glance.

The guard's expression flickered, but he eventually gave up trying to intervene.

Still filled with puzzlement and thought, his eyes darted around, and a strange, anticipatory grin played on his lips, as if he expected something thrilling.

As Lumian reached the second floor, the two guards with monocles simply watched him pass without hindrance. They wore similar enigmatic and expectant smiles.

No Low-Sequence Beyonders? Lumian muttered, disappointed.

He had braced himself for a confrontation, something to showcase for the Alone Bar across the street. But, to his surprise, the other fake Amons in the Salle de Bal Unique were just regular folks. None of them seemed inclined to engage with him.

It made sense, though. Amon wasn't like Mr. Fool or the Great Mother, capable of granting large-scale boons to believers. As for the Low- and Mid-Sequence Beyonders, they had likely been dealt with. In the undetectable angelic struggle, they might have been eliminated.

The remaining individuals probably had no idea that the dance hall had turned unusual, and many of their colleagues had vanished without a trace. They likely believed that Lumian was about to join them or go mad from some sort of prank.

With no imposter Amon to confront, Lumian had no option but to improvise and enact the situation himself.

He pulled his revolver from its holster and nonchalantly fired at the rooms on both sides of the corridor.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Each bullet hit a window with precision, the shattering glass echoing through the hall, accompanied by gunshots.

The second-floor guards were both surprised and perplexed by Lumian's actions. They suspected that he had been repeatedly fooled by a coworker, leading to a mental breakdown.

Otherwise, why would he be taking on the air and windows?

Instinctively, the guards raised their right hands to adjust their monocles in their eyes. Their expressions became increasingly

eager, as if they were anticipating the climax of this thriller.
Go, confront the iceberg beneath the sea and the fear lurking in the darkness!
After firing four shots, Lumian reached the largest office.
He pushed the slightly ajar door open and found a man seated behind a massive wooden desk.
The man had a wide forehead and narrow cheeks. His dark, slightly curly hair framed his face, and his light-blue eyes seemed unfocused.
He also sported a crystal-like monocle over his right eye and wore a loose, comfortable black robe.
"Timmons?" Lumian inquired, entering with a furrowed brow.
The man snapped out of his daze and responded with a sense of disappointment, as if he had lost something precious.
"I'm Timmons."
"You're not dead yet?" Lumian asked, both surprised and amused.
As far as he knew, the other members of Salle de Bal Unique were in a state of being Amon and not Amon. However, Timmons, the boss here, must have been deeply parasitized. Such a person should have perished in the angelic-level battle, losing his life.
But that wasn't the case.
Timmons glanced at Lumian, maintaining the frustration and emptiness of someone who had lost their soul.
"Many people wish me dead, but they don't seem to have the power to curse me.
"Perhaps I'm already dead. All that's left is a shell."
"That's not important. What matters is that you return my client's 110,000 verl d'or, along with the interest," Lumian stated as he retrieved the contract from his satchel with his left hand, courtesy of the bankrupt merchant, Fitz.
He anticipated Timmons' rejection of his request and an ensuing confrontation.
Timmons shook off his despondency, raised a hand to his forehead, and smiled.
"There's cash and accessories in the safe. Help yourself. The password is 010103."
"I thought you'd put up a fight." Lumian sighed in disappointment.
Timmons gazed at the revolver in Lumian's hand and remarked, "I'm just a swindler, not a miser. I can swindle others again when I'm out of money. But if I'm dead, there's nothing left.
"Besides, I've already lost the most important thing today. Compared to that, 110,000 verl d'or is nothing."
What do you mean you can swindle others if you're out of money? Haven't you ever considered becoming wealthy through legal

means? Lumian pursed his lips and made his way towards the mechanical safe in the office.
Three, two, one... As he approached the safe, he counted down, expecting Timmons to launch a surprise attack from behind.
Yet, the owner of Salle de Bal Unique remained motionless. He didn't cry out for help or attempt to summon the police.
Lumian crouched in front of the iron-gray mechanical safe. Using the password provided by Timmons, he twisted the knob repeatedly until he heard a satisfying click.
He glanced at the banknotes and gold bars that clearly exceeded 100,000 verl d'or, opened his satchel, and collected them all.
With that task completed, Lumian raised his revolver, shattered the office window, and climbed out.
Timmons's lips curled into a playful smile, one shared by everyone present.
However, at that moment, Lumian unexpectedly spun around and pulled the trigger.
Bang!
A yellow bullet grazed Timmons's hair and embedded itself into a cabinet nearby.
The monocle-wearing Timmons's body tensed, and his smile disappeared. His eyes were filled with bewilderment.
He even caught a whiff of something burning above his head.
Lumian grinned and waved his hand.
"Surprised?"
With that, he leaped off the windowsill and landed in the alley behind Salle de Bal Unique.
Timmons's expression gradually shifted, now marked by confusion and bewilderment.
Inside Salle de Bal Unique, the dancers with monocles on their right eyes and short suits went about their business, eagerly awaiting the intruder's descent, imagining him donning a monocle and officially joining their ranks.
However, amid the intermittent gunshots, they failed to witness the spectacle they had anticipated.
...
Near Place du Purgatoire in Rue Ancienne, there was a bell tower belonging to the Eternal Blazing Sun Cathedral. Adjacent to the bell tower stood a newly constructed ten-story building.
Franca, disguised as a typical female mercenary, positioned herself at the rooftop's edge with a brass telescope, her gaze fixed on the Alone Bar in the distance.
Amidst the distant echoes of gunshots, Leah, the bartender clad in a white shirt, black bow tie, and a dark knee-length dress,

emerged at the bar's entrance, her eyes directed towards Salle de Bal Unique, situated diagonally across from her.
Before long, Franca observed gray rats emerging from beside Leah's feet. These rats crossed the street and disappeared beside the ancient building.
After another two to three minutes, a man and a woman exited the Alone Bar, pushing their way through the guards and entering Salle de Bal Unique.
Franca scrutinized the pair through her telescope and noticed that their expressions seemed animated and their movements agile when they "interacted" with the guards. However, as they crossed the street and passed by the guards, their expressions grew stiffer, and their movements became somewhat robotic.
Marionettes? Franca speculated.
As for the whereabouts of the Marionettist who created and controlled these marionettes, she couldn't discern it at all. The only thing she could deduce was that the effective range of this ability spanned dozens of meters, if not more.
Simultaneously, she couldn't help but complain, When there are people, they appear as 'real people.' But when there's nobody around, the Marionettist can't be bothered to maintain their facial expressions and character details? Isn't this too unprofessional?
Or perhaps it's a tactic to intimidate occasional onlookers and passersby who happen to catch a glimpse?
Franca maintained her vigil until Lumian had returned to his original form, changed his attire, and completed his anti-tracking measures. Even then, she couldn't spot the Marionettist when he met up with her.
Other than Leah, everyone else appeared to be marionettes!
Franca conveyed her frustration to Lumian, "Isn't this level of caution and meticulousness excessive? I couldn't find anything conclusive. All I can confirm is that there's definitely a Marionettist here, and it's highly likely that there's more than one."
Just hearing her account made Lumian's head ache, much like when dealing with Amon.
Could it be that they became "neighbors" because they excelled at concealing their true forms and were exceptionally elusive and hard to uncover?
"Is there no way to use Magic Mirror Divination to gather some clues?" Lumian pondered briefly before inquiring.
Franca gently shook her head in response.
"This is the Seer pathway. Unless I can directly possess one of the marionettes, I won't be able to locate their true bodies."

Lumian fell silent as he gazed at the now tranquil Salle de Bal Unique.
"Let's head back. At the next gathering, we'll gather information from I Know Someone, Hisoka, and Bard. They shouldn't be as elusive as Loki. We can still pretend to be duped and see if we can draw them out."
When the time came, Hidden Blade couldn't step forward; Muggle would have to handle it herself. Franca had already purchased a copy of Loki's information and was among the potential suspects.
"Agreed," Franca concurred, realizing that this was their best course of action.
The two of them promptly departed from the high-rise apartment and secured a four-wheeled, four-seater rental carriage.
As the carriage reached the intersection between Quartier de l'Observatoire and Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, Franca turned to Lumian.
"Aren't you going to perform another anti-tracking procedure?"
"Wouldn't relying on your anti-divination skills be sufficient?" Lumian responded with a smile. "Besides, after leaving Salle de Bal Unique, I've already undertaken several anti-tracking measures."
Franca stared at him for a couple of seconds before letting out a resigned sigh.
"Fine."
...
Avenue du Marché, market district.
Lumian, carrying a satchel filled with banknotes and gold, said his goodbyes to Franca and proceeded towards Rue Anarchie. Franca, on the other hand, headed back to Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Rue Anarchie was as lively and crowded as ever. Lumian weaved his way through vendors and pedestrians, drawing closer to Auberge du Coq Doré.
Suddenly, he experienced an unsettling sensation. His body seemed to lose coordination, as if someone had injected glue into his joints.

Chapter 384: Stagnation

Not good! Lumian was both a Hunter and a Dancer, and his mastery over his body was amazing. Any unfamiliar or abnormal situation immediately triggered his instincts, alerting him to potential danger.

But in that critical moment, his thoughts seemed to slow down, shrouded in a dense fog. Each idea froze, demanding tremendous effort to clear.

I've been attacked...

Loki is really... here...

Is this... the performance... of a Marionettist's abilities?

As it nears the end... I won't be able... to think... *Will I... become his... marionette?*

My sense of danger... is clouded...

Dammit... Termi... boros, it's impossible... that you didn't notice... the changes in my fate... You didn't... warn me...

Did He intentionally tell me... that Loki... nearly tracked me... to make me do it again?

Me becoming Loki's... puppet... aids... Him in escaping... the seal?

I can't just... wait like this... I must resist with all my might...

Where is... Loki...?

In these fragmented thoughts, Lumian strained to move. His hand found its way into his pocket, and he surveyed his surroundings with stiffness.

Previously, he and Franca had discussed the limitations of the Marionettist's power. They agreed that it must have a certain range or require proximity. Otherwise, it would exceed the capabilities of a Sequence 5 and only be within the realm of a saint who had transcended into godhood. Those from different pathways that Franca knew couldn't resist it at all.

The duo believed that this ability either required a certain medium or could only be activated at a close distance. Just like the Ring of Punishment's Psychic Piercing, it could only be effective if the distance between them was reduced to five meters.

Lumian suspected Loki was hiding nearby in the crowd, perhaps no more than ten meters away.

What greeted his eyes were street vendors and passersby. Some of their faces were familiar, while others were unfamiliar. They were no different from usual.

In his haste, Lumian couldn't discern Loki among them. Adding to the challenge, Loki was a Faceless, skilled in transformation and disguise.

As Lumian continued his search for Loki, a crimson flame

manifested in his left palm.
His motives were twofold: first, to test his ability to resist a Marionettist's control and invasion by inflicting pain upon himself, and second, to set a question and observe how Loki would respond. By studying Loki's reactions, he hoped to glean insights into Loki's exact whereabouts and weaknesses in his marionette-making abilities.
But just as the searing pain coursed through his mind, Lumian heard a distinct snap.
Instantly, the crimson flame in his palm dissipated into a harmless stream of light, unable to form anything explosive.
Lumian spun around, trying to identify the source of the snapping of fingers.
However, his joints had become encased in a sticky "glue," and his movements grew increasingly rigid and sluggish.
This delay caused him to turn a second slower than he intended. Everyone within his line of sight appeared normal, and he couldn't pinpoint who had snapped their fingers.
Marionettist... is indeed capable... of Flame Controlling...
Pain... doesn't... help much... in the slowdown of my thoughts... and stiffening of my body... It only... marginally... increased... my reaction speed...
I can't... waste time... on such matters... The most important thing... now... is to find... Loki. Otherwise... whether I use... the Spell of Harrumph... summon Mr. K... or wait for... Franca to save me... wouldn't... significantly change... the situation...
I wonder... if spirit world traversal... can be used... If... the next... two or three attempts... fail... I'll... give it a try... and see if I can teleport out... of a Marionettist's... ability range...
Lumian's thoughts grew increasingly sluggish, but they weren't to the point where he couldn't think, react, or dodge any attack.
Soon, with his rich combat experience, he came up with an idea.
From the... current situation... a Marionettist... indeed needs... to be at close range... to gradually transform... their target... into a marionette...
In that... case... I'll make sure... there's no one... or animals... within a ten-meter... radius!
Whoever... lingers... within the Inferno Hell... shall be Loki!
Once Lumian understood the situation, he immediately opened his mouth and shouted, "There... is... a... fire!"
Crimson flames surged from Lumian's body as he finished his staccato sentence.
With his feet as the center, they spread out, igniting the fruit peels and litter on the ground.

Alerted by Lumian's warning, nearby street vendors and pedestrians swiftly gathered their belongings and fled toward the ends of Rue Anarchie upon seeing the rising flames.
Seeing their hasty retreat, Lumian's sluggish smile emerged.
Yes, you can use Flame Controlling, but I'm not going to do any delicate maneuvers now. My only move is to constantly ignite the surrounding things and increase the variety of fire sources!
Moreover, this will inevitably draw the attention of official Beyonders!
Crimson flames expanded in all directions, resembling a vibrant ocean gradually consuming the earth.
Despite his faltering gaze, Lumian still managed to catch a glimpse of a figure flickering within the flames—a figure with black hair, blue eyes, and an ordinary face, blending in with the crowd of clerks on the road.
...
After bidding Lumian farewell, Franca made her way toward Rue des Blouses Blanches.
However, her journey took an unexpected turn as she suddenly veered into an alley, disappearing into the shadows.
This Demoness of Pleasure began to stealthily make her way toward Rue Anarchie.
This was her prior agreement with Lumian.
If their initial plan of barging into Salle de Bal Unique failed to provoke the Beyonders in the Alone Bar or have them reveal themselves, they had a backup plan—a kind of "fishing" expedition after leaving Rue Ancienne to see if they could "encounter" their target.
Franca's earlier inquiry about Lumian's intention to engage in counter-tracking was essentially confirming if they should stick to their original strategy. Lumian's response had been affirmative.
As Franca approached Rue Anarchie, she retrieved a mirror from the shadows.
This mirror was a Mirror Substitution, crafted using Lumian's blood and hair!
While it couldn't be used as a substitute for death or injury at this distance, it had a profound mystical connection to the original body. It could be employed to monitor Lumian's general condition.
In simple terms, if the mirror were to suddenly shatter, it would signal that Lumian had met his demise. If it displayed a few deep cracks, it would indicate that Lumian had suffered severe injuries.
Likewise, Franca had placed a Mirror Substitution on Lumian. This precaution was taken because they were uncertain whom Loki might target after their separation. They had no choice but to

conceal themselves in the shadows and continue their activities. Through Mirror Substitution, they could keep tabs on each other's well-being and provide timely assistance.
This method was more reliable than attempting to discern changes in luck, as Loki possessed formidable anti-divination abilities and could manipulate fate after making decisions.
Franca, deep in her stealthy advancement, was suddenly alerted as the mirror in her hand grew icy cold.
Utilizing her Dark Vision, she pierced through the shadows and witnessed the mirror's transformation into a lifeless gray, as if it had rusted or been submerged in the depths of an icy lake.
Ciel is under attack? Franca's heart tightened as she quickened her pace.
Upon reaching Rue Anarchie, she was met with the sight of spreading flames. Within the crimson inferno, a figure flickered intermittently. Occasionally, it opened its mouth, producing a sharp bang.
It sounded like a real gunshot, causing vendors and pedestrians to scatter in fear, believing a violent gunfight between the mobs was unfolding.
Lumian, on the other hand, struggled to evade the attacks, but he failed twice. The Air Bullets grazed his body, leaving noticeable wounds.
However, it was clear that the figure didn't truly intend to harm him. It seemed more concerned about the potential complications that injuries might cause before a specific juncture.
Relieved that Lumian was relatively unscathed, Franca retreated into the shadows and approached the battlefield cautiously. As she drew nearer, she retrieved a mirror and,
disengaging from the shadows, directed the mirror toward the clusters of flames. Her right hand became enshrouded in zero-temperature black flames.
When the figure appeared in the mirror's reflection, Franca swiftly ran her right hand across the mirror's surface.
Silently, the figure burst into pitch-black flames.
He swiftly thinned and shrank, transforming into an intricately cut paper figurine.
Among the crowd, roughly ten to twenty meters away, an unusually ordinary-looking man clad in a black suit emerged.
Lumian's thoughts snapped back to full speed, and his body shook off the stiffness that had hindered him.
In a flash, he vanished from his previous position and reappeared just seven meters away from the suspected Loki.
Lumian then exclaimed, "Hmph!"

A brilliant beam of white light shot forth from his nostrils, targeting the ordinary-looking man with black hair and blue eyes.
Simultaneously, Franca acted in perfect coordination. She conjured a transparent ice spear and hurled it toward their target.
Upon piercing the ground, white frost rapidly spread from the impact, chilling those nearby and causing their bodies to stiffen.
At that very moment, a thin-faced passerby with brown hair and brown eyes interposed himself between Lumian and the suspected Loki, intercepting the white beam created by Lumian.
He appeared unharmed, his blank eyes gazing upwards as he began to sing an aria.
"Oh, my Sun!"
In an instant, it was as if a blinding sun had risen within the minds of Lumian, Franca, and others nearby, rendering their thoughts sluggish.
Instinctively, the duo moved to evade, with one either retreating into the shadows while encasing herself in a crystalline and resilient frost or rolling to the side of the road and using the Niese Face to alter his appearance.
When the intense sunlight eventually receded, they found that both the man suspected to be Loki and the "passerby" singing the aria had vanished into thin air.
Fearful glances from vendors and passersby were directed their way. Those closest to the spectacle had shut their eyes tightly, tears streaming down their faces.

Chapter 385: Before and After Comparison

Lumian swiftly assessed the surroundings, taking in the scattered gas street lamps and their flickering crimson flames. In the distance, figures moved about cautiously, but none dared to draw near. The individuals up ahead couldn't even open their eyes due to the blinding glare of the "sun."

In this situation, whether it was the suspected Loki or the "passerby" who had sung that aria, there was no sign of either of them.

"Son of a sow, did they just vanish into thin air?" Lumian couldn't help but curse under his breath, his anxiety and anger mounting.

Had they fled without even engaging in a proper battle?

Did they disengage once a single strike failed?

"Dammit, were you born in the year of the rat? Slippery as eels, and they vanish at the drop of a hat!" Franca cursed as she approached Lumian, using a peculiar phrase that seemed like a translation. "The Seer and Marauder pathways are truly interchangeable. Their styles are too damn similar, aren't they?"

This was primarily evident in their inability to strike or capture the primary target.

The key difference was that the Seer pathway started behaving this way from Sequence 7, while the Marauder pathway might have to wait until they reached Sequence 4 to exhibit such traits.

Lumian's mind raced as he pondered how to track down Loki and his marionette.

Perhaps they had already made their escape, or maybe they were lurking somewhere in the evening streets of Rue Anarchie!

A marionette...

Yes, that aria-singing marionette had taken my Spell of Harrumph head-on without flinching. That suggests there's a high chance it's already dead. No active, conscious Spirit Body...

My near-transformation into a marionette confirms this indirectly...

If the marionette is dead, it probably doesn't possess the fate of a living being. No so-called luck. Even if there is, it's locked in darkness. That spells death...

If we can't locate Loki, who possesses Faceless powers, maybe we can start with his marionette!

With this plan in mind, Lumian concentrated, carefully observing the destiny of the people standing more than ten to twenty meters away.

He scanned everything that had a destiny and wasn't shrouded in darkness.

After a rapid survey, Lumian couldn't identify any potential marionette targets.
He let out a slow, disappointed sigh.
"Let's get out of here. The firefighters are on their way. Official Beyonders should be arriving soon," Franca warned Lumian.
Lumian withdrew his gaze and left Rue Anarchie before the crimson flames could be extinguished.
His intention was to take a circuitous route back to Auberge du Coq Doré. There, he would return the scammed funds he had obtained from Salle de Bal Unique to the bankrupt merchant, Fitz, and claim his share as agreed.
After taking a dozen steps, Lumian suddenly remembered Monsieur Ruhr, who had succumbed to illness, and Madame Michel, who had hanged herself while singing the Capital of Joy.
He feared that he might unwittingly bring a catastrophe involving Beyonder powers to Auberge du Coq Doré and his entrustee, Fitz.
Aurore had portrayed despicable and deranged criminals in two of her novels. They relished beginning their torment with those their targets held dear, forcing them to witness the tragic deaths of their friends one by one.
As the leader of April Fool's, Loki took pleasure in manipulating others' minds. He had no qualms about harming his comrades, let alone murdering innocent people he had never met. Therefore, the likelihood was high that he would commence with Lumian's acquaintances and employ their deaths to shatter Lumian's psyche. He would secretly revel in watching Lumian descend into madness before seizing the opportunity to end his life.
Though it was only a possibility, Lumian refused to take the risk. He halted and turned towards Avenue du Marché.
"What's the matter?" Franca inquired, her expression one of confusion.
Having regained his composure, Lumian flashed a reassuring smile and replied, "Let's grab a drink at Salle de Bal Brise."
The fate of the mobsters he frequently associated with was of lesser concern. Mobsters knew they had to be prepared for such eventualities!
Franca was momentarily taken aback but quickly grasped Lumian's underlying worry.
Loki had hooked a big fish but failed to capture it. It was clear he had seen through their true appearances. He could hide in the shadows and wait for the perfect moment. As for Lumian and herself, unless they abandoned their current identities and used their anti-divination and anti-tracking abilities to survive elsewhere, they would be left in a state of constant suspicion,

fearing that any rat they saw might attack them.
Compared to Auberge du Coq Doré, the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise offered a quieter and more defensible location.
Furthermore, in the event of a Beyonder-level confrontation, it was better to involve mobsters rather than innocent bystanders.
"I'll change my attire as well," Franca hinted, indicating her desire to alter her appearance and remain hidden in the shadows, making it difficult for Loki to locate her and launch any potential attacks.
Similarly, she intended to have Jenna return home and stay with her brother for a while to avoid becoming collateral damage.
In the face of such a bizarre and terrifying adversary, the survivability of an Instigator remained too fragile.
Lumian gently patted the concealed Franca's Mirror Substitution hidden beneath his clothing with his right hand, signaling the need for them to watch each other's backs.
Franca nodded solemnly, affirming her understanding of the situation.
...
Salle de Bal Brise, the café on the second floor.
Lumian settled at the far end near the window and turned to his bodyguard, Sarkota.
"Go to Auberge du Coq Doré and fetch a bankrupt merchant named Fitz."
With such an intermediary, Fitz would appear to have achieved his objectives through his association with the Savoie Mob, and there was no direct connection to Ciel Dubois. If Loki intended to select a victim, he would likely focus on the Savoie Mob members affiliated with Lumian.
With the weighty satchel resting on his lap, Lumian patiently awaited Fitz's arrival while contemplating the Loki-related issues at hand.
Having lost track of the April Fool's leader, Lumian was left with only certain phenomena to guide him in this matter.
One of the details was an option Lumian had predetermined before taking action.
If Loki had indeed taken the bait, why did I manage to elude this April Fool's leader's tracking abilities using anti-tracking techniques in my previous encounter but not this time?
Upon leaving Salle de Bal Unique, Lumian had intentionally followed the same anti-tracking procedures as before. He reverted to his original appearance, changed his clothing, and modified his satchel. However, as he traversed Rue Ancienne again and reunited with Franca, he refrained from employing any anti-tracking

measures. This was done to establish a comparative sample and identify any discrepancies.
After all, if he failed to capture the bizarre and seemingly unkillable Loki, his efforts would be in vain.
He needed to gain something valuable from this encounter.
This was a smaller trap concealed within a larger one.
Logically, if my anti-tracking procedures had shaken off Loki previously, there should be no reason for an exception this time. I had meticulously paid attention to the people and creatures around me, even avoiding the watchful eyes of birds in the sky. Even if a mere insect became one of Loki's marionettes, it would struggle to keep up with my swiftness...
Therefore, either Franca had been targeted early in the morning, or Loki recognized me when I passed through Rue Ancienne again after my anti-tracking.
Franca carried out anti-divination procedures and was a distance away from the Alone Bar and Salle de Bal Unique. She didn't even enter Rue Ancienne and had used non-mystical methods to observe. It's unlikely that she'll be exposed so quickly unless Loki was aware from the outset that such an observer would be present...
The likeliest scenario was that Loki had recognized me when I passed through Rue Ancienne again after my anti-tracking procedures. But how had this recognition occurred? I had reverted to my original appearance, altered my clothing, and even chosen to pass through in a rented carriage to avoid suspicion. According to Anthony, this should have concealed my unchanged leather shoes from prying eyes and hidden my typical gait and body language...
I had even applied cologne to mask my original scent...
What unique characteristics do I possess that allows Loki to discern my identity within such a brief period?
Lumian compared the differences and gradually arrived at a hypothesis.
Either a Marionettist or one of his marionettes possesses the ability to directly identify a person at the level of their soul, consciousness, or some other aspect, or Loki can perceive distinctive traits that set me apart from others—such as Inevitability's angel, Mr. Fool's seal, or the Blood Emperor's aura?
Although Lie belongs to the Seer pathway, it does not have a readily detectable convergence force that corresponds to Loki's Sequence...
The more Lumian pondered, the more convinced he became that Loki had a means of piercing his disguise, but his tracking abilities

were limited. A vigilant target who remained wary of strangers, animals, birds, and insects while being impossible to carry out any direct divination would successfully evade him.
Regardless of how Loki told him apart, this was the best explanation when carrying out the before-and-after comparison.
With this in mind, Lumian had a new idea.
Lumian's lips curled slightly as he cast his gaze toward the dark night sky.
Fifteen minutes later, Fitz, the bankrupt merchant, was brought into the café by Sarkota
Lumian signaled for Sarkota to step aside momentarily and addressed Fitz, "I've already recovered the money. How much do you think you should receive?"
As he spoke, Lumian emptied the banknotes, gold coins, and valuable accessories onto the table, his eyes briefly scanning over them.
"About 130,000 verl d'or in total."
Fitz blurted out, "60,000, no, 50,000. No, just give me 30,000 verl d'or."
With a smile, Lumian separated a few bundles of neatly bound banknotes and tossed them to Fitz.
"As we agreed, the interest belongs to me, and I'll take 50% of the principal. Here's 50,000 verl d'or."
Fitz accepted the money with gratitude, expressing his heartfelt thanks.
While he didn't receive the full amount, 50,000 verl d'or was a substantial sum that would enable him to start anew with hope in his heart.
50% of the principal along with interest was a fair arrangement!
Lumian was equally pleased. Through the operation facilitated by the Angel of Time by Mr. Fool's side, he had effortlessly gained 50,000 verl d'or in banknotes and 30,000 gold coins.
After all, he had worked so hard to gather gold, but in the end, he only accumulated 75,000 gold.
Deep in thought, he contemplated the idea of purchasing sacrificial offerings from the corresponding domain as a token of gratitude to Mr. Fool and the Angel of Time.
After waiting for over half an hour, Lumian ascended to the bedroom on the second floor. He discarded his satchel and employed Lie to alter his appearance once more, assuming the likeness of a male Aurore with black hair and brown eyes.
He changed into a shirt, vest, trousers, and leather boots, stowed away Lie, and transferred the Flog boxing gloves into his briefcase.
He carefully surveyed the scene beyond the window.

Once he confirmed that no humans, rats, or birds were in the vicinity, Lumian pushed open the window and gracefully leaped out, seemingly unaware that Loki might possess the ability to see through his disguise.

Chapter 386: Caution

In the dark and deserted back alley,
Lumian carefully navigated the maze of discarded refuse infested with rats and cockroaches. His movements were deliberate, alternating between rapid dashes and cautious steps, sudden changes in direction, and even a few circles, as if he were evading an unseen pursuer.
Finally, he arrived at Rue des Blouses Blanches and entered the seemingly "abandoned" safe house, whose lease had not yet expired.
Following a process, he pulled the heavy curtains shut and meticulously inspected every corner of the room.
Compared to before, he not only eradicated the bedbugs and routed the rats but he also left no room for tiny, rice-grain-sized flying insects. He demanded absolute cleanliness.
With that done, Lumian seated himself at the table. He smoothed out a sheet of paper and began to write.
"Honorable Madame Hela,
"When I took part in the April Fool's team discussion masquerading as my sister, Muggle, I couldn't help but notice the peculiar reactions of Hisoka, Mad Lady, Bard, and Ultraman upon Muggle's unexpected return after her prolonged absence. I suspect 'I Know Someone' was the psychiatrist Muggle sought in her final moments.
"Simultaneously, they were collaborating with Loki in a ruse, hoping to entice members from other teams to embark on a subterranean quest for the remains of the Ancient Sun God.
"I believe Loki is the de facto leader of April Fool's. If there's anything awry with the others, it undoubtedly concerns him as well. Consequently, I acquired a copy of the Ancient Sun God's information from him and enlisted divination services to examine the mechanical typewriter responsible for producing the text. It happened at the Alone Bar on Rue Ancienne in Trier Quartier de l'Observatoire.
"Following some field investigation, it became apparent that this locale serves as the stronghold for Bureau 8. However, Loki appears to have set his sights on me. I was assaulted in the evening and narrowly escaped becoming his marionette. My escape, though, exposed my true identity to him.
"As I write this letter, I find myself in the safe house I had previously prepared. Nevertheless, I can't be certain whether I have eluded Loki's pursuit.
"I strongly suspect there's something amiss with him. If left

unchecked, he could pose a grave threat to the Research Society in the days ahead.
"I hope to receive your assistance."
Lumian felt no shame in laying out his intentions plainly.
His plan was to make himself the bait that would draw Loki out of hiding, while Hela, with her ability to harness Concealment, would lurk in the shadows, ready to deliver the decisive blow to the leader of April Fool's.
Perhaps only Hela, with her superior Sequence and mastery of Concealment, had a chance of evading detection and discovering the true body of their bizarre and unkillable adversary.
After folding the letter, Lumian swiftly arranged the altar and summoned the pure silver skull adorned with pale-white flames in its eye sockets.
...
Franca stealthily made her way back to Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches. She used her persuasive abilities to convince Jenna to temporarily vacate the premises for a couple of days.
Only after Jenna repeatedly confirmed that she would be of no assistance did she reluctantly give up her facade of bravery, departing amidst a string of curses.
Quickly, Franca changed into different attire and donned the disguise props she had acquired from Rentas, a member of the Bliss Society, transforming her appearance entirely.
As she applied makeup, she couldn't help but curse fate's mother.
Dammit, I shouldn't have let Jenna go so soon! She's much better at handling these things than me, and her makeup skills are superior.
Such skills were fundamental for an apprentice actress.
With a simple disguise in place, Franca seamlessly shifted between invisibility and concealment within the shadows, weaving her way through the market district.
She made a concerted effort to thwart any attempts at divination and employed anti-tracking techniques learned from Lumian.
Finally, she returned to Rue des Blouses Blanches and entered Building 6.
This was the safe house she had prepared for herself, conveniently overlooking her original residence.
Phew... Franca, having completed all the procedures, heaved a sigh of relief and lay down in the Loen-style recliner.
Simultaneously, she muttered to herself, I've only known Ciel for less than three months. Why does it feel like I've experienced more in this time than in the past year...
Is this guy some sort of jinx reincarnate?

...
In the secure confines of the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches, Lumian patiently waited for nearly fifteen minutes. Then, from the abrupt darkness, the pure silver skull's head emerged, clutching a simple folded letter in its skeletal teeth.
"Thank you," Lumian replied habitually, accepting the letter.
If Hela was unwilling to engage with a suspected member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Lumian had no choice but to abandon his current plan and swiftly locate Franca. He would guide her through spirit world traversal to distant locales like the hill district, Quartier Éraste, and other suburbs before returning.
He felt that it was the only way to evade Loki's pursuit or lock-on. Moving openly was out of the question unless he shifted to an entirely different area.
Lumian unfolded the paper and discovered that Hela's response was succinct: "Got it."
A wry smile curled at the corners of Lumian's mouth as he conjured crimson flames from his hand, igniting the reply.
Without delay, he restored the table's surface to its ordinary state and reverted to his original appearance, aided by the Lie earring.
Next, Lumian extinguished the carbide lamp and reclined on the bed, closing his eyes and feigning slumber.
As minutes slipped away, night settled in, and Rue des Blouses Blanches descended into stillness.
The crimson moonlight filtered through heavy curtains, casting a subdued, eerie glow within the room.
After an indeterminate span of time, a small, grayish-black figure emerged from a concealed crevice in the corner—a nondescript rat.
Soundlessly and stealthily, the rat approached the table, ascending its surface. It moved about with deliberate intent, as if surveying its territory for any signs of intrusion.
After a brief inspection, it halted its actions and retreated into the shadowy corners untouched by the dim moonlight. Its body now faced the bed.
The rat fixated its gaze upon Lumian with an unnervingly human-like intensity.
It appeared to meld with the darkness, assuming a statue-like stillness, completely immobile and unwavering in its focus on Lumian.
Nearly ten minutes passed, and faint, nearly imperceptible footsteps echoed from the corridor outside the apartment.
Tap, tap, tap. The footsteps drew nearer.
Abruptly, the footsteps vanished as if they had never been or had

come to a standstill at some unseen juncture.
The rat retreated from the shadowy realm untouched by the crimson moonlight, traversing the table and vanishing through the same crevice it had emerged from.
With swiftness, it disappeared, leaving the room in an even deeper silence, broken only by the faint sound of Lumian's slow, rhythmic breathing.
Lumian didn't open his eyes. His body was very relaxed, as if he had truly fallen asleep.
...
6 Rue des Blouses Blanches, in an apartment.
Franca reclined in the recliner, swaying back and forth with the chair.
Troubled, she pondered what to do next. With such a bizarre and terrifying foe lurking in the shadows, the constant sense of being watched had left her restless, and she couldn't find solace whether sitting or standing.
I need to resolve this quickly. One can be a thief for a thousand days, but how can you guard against a thief for a thousand days? One misstep, and it's all over...
Why don't I abandon the mission and relocate? Or I can go all out and ask Madam Judgment for help to apprehend Loki under the pretext that the mission will likely fail. It's feasible, but I'll shoulder a debt that I won't be able to repay until I become a demigod. Even if Ciel takes half of it, it'll be a heavy burden...
We can also ask Madam Hela to convene an emergency gathering and accuse Loki and the others of causing Muggle's death on the spot. We can request that we find reliable members to interrogate each other and see which side is lying. Uh, we can't be entirely sure if there's really something wrong with Loki and the others, but it's certain that I colluded with an outsider and lured in a spy...
The more Franca thought about it, the more frustrated she became. She used proverbs from her homeland and didn't deliberately change it.
Suddenly, an overwhelming sense of danger gripped her, and simultaneously, an eerie chill crawled up her spine.
Her body stiffened, and a figure reflected in her lake-like eyes.
Clad in a short black formal suit typical of clerks, with neatly combed brown hair, a face bearing Southern Continent heritage, and dull green eyes...
Wraith! The word flashed through her mind as she recognized the nature of the impending attack.
Franca's thoughts became hazy, and her right hand instinctively rose, as if resisting an unseen force.

She channeled the spirituality within her Soul Body, preparing to unleash the black flames of a Demoness.
This ability targeted a Spirit Body and was capable of incinerating Wraiths. Demonesses possessed a heightened resistance to such flames compared to other pathways, and they could even use injuries to escape or severely harm their adversaries.
At that moment, Franca heard a magnetic voice.
"It's futile. Surrender."
The sound pierced Franca's mind like sharp arrows, interrupting her attempt to condense the black flames.
As soon as the voice faded away, her mind seemed to be shrouded in a thick fog, and a thick frosted glass appeared in front of her.
The voice continued, "I didn't use my full strength in the evening to test the waters. The person impersonating Muggle with a high-level existence sealed in him must possess some special abilities. If I hadn't done my best to gather information, I might have been the one to die.
"After the probe, things got even more interesting. I went to his place just now and felt that it wasn't safe enough. Therefore, I planned to turn you into my marionette and launch a surprise attack.
"Heh heh, do you think you can escape my grasp? There's something special about us. As long as we're within a kilometer of each other, I can use the power of a great existence to sense your location.
"I've long yearned for a Demoness to be my marionette. It'll definitely taste good..."
Franca's Spirit Body was repeatedly affected by the sound, interrupting her efforts to activate Mirror Substitution and condense black flames in advance. Her thoughts became increasingly sluggish, and her joints felt as if they were filled with glue.
Can… Loki… sense… my location?
What's... so special... Why... can he...
Before Franca could piece together any answers or formulate a complete response, the magnetic voice, now with a sinister smile, continued, "I can't waste any more time. I must accelerate to avoid unforeseen complications."
At this point, the voice turned respectful and recited in Franca's unusually familiar language, "The Immortal Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings;
"The Sky Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings..."

Chapter 387: Vile

In the room with the thick curtains, Lumian suddenly felt the Mirror Substitution inside his clothes turn abnormally cold. Even through the linen shirt, he couldn't help but shiver.

His heart tightened. He couldn't afford to feign sleep anymore. He sat up and took out the mirror.

Beneath the faint crimson moonlight, the mirror lost its luster, its surface resembling ice.

Lumian knew that Franca was in danger. Without hesitation, he activated the mystical connection between the substitute and its true form, emitting a dim light from the black mark on his right shoulder.

In an instant, Lumian vanished from the bed, reappearing in the living room at 6 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Almost simultaneously, Lumian saw the surroundings engulfed in an eerie grayness, a fog obscuring the crimson moonlight. Franca lay in a recliner, her body contorting as if she fought for survival.

Her lake-colored eyes were filled with a turbulent mix of emotions: anger, fear, anxiety, and worry. A vague figure seemed to encircle her. Her head tried to move, but her movements were restrained by invisible threads.

Suddenly, the sound of nails scraping on a blackboard assaulted their senses, incomprehensible words piercing their Spirit Bodies. Their consciousness soared upward until they reached a dark void shimmering with countless stars.

In the highest reaches of this void, mysterious symbols swirled, their forms beyond description.

They coalesced into a dynamic, otherworldly door that defied the intrusion of even the moon's crimson light.

Lumian and Franca's spirits were drawn inexorably toward the door. As they approached, a faint voice emanated from within—a voice that seemed to hold the secrets of the entire universe, as well as the madness, self-destruction, and darkness lurking within every heart.

With each step toward the dynamic door, the maddening ramblings grew more intense, causing their heads to throb in agony. Yet an overpowering, primal urge compelled them to enter, to merge with the formless entity behind the door, and to partake in a clandestine pact that promised essential, primordial, extraordinary, and potent knowledge.

Amidst the sea of incomprehensible symbols, the door stood slightly ajar, allowing invisible entities to pass through.

With a resounding hum, Lumian and Franca's minds were

plunged into a state of blankness, as if struck by a relentless force.
The chaotic ravings they had heard coalesced into grotesque, shadowy entities that corroded their very Soul Bodies and physical bodies.
Franca's eyes widened, and her flaxen-colored hair fluttered in the windless air, vaguely thickening.
Blood seeped from the corners of her eyes, nostrils, ears, mouth, and pores, as if a demon was trying to separate her flesh from her skin.
Franca's thoughts were in a state of intense disorder, as if a human had been thrown into a factory blender.
Seizing the moment, the Wraith that had been attached to Franca detached itself from the Demoness of Pleasure.
This Wraith, dressed in a sleek black suit, its eyes flickering with a sinister green hue, let out a piercing shriek.
A cacophonous shattering sound, both illusory and real, filled the room as Franca's body vanished from the recliner and reappeared in the bedroom.
Her Mirror Substitution had been activated instinctively, saving her from losing control, but she remained unconscious, collapsing on the spot.
Beneath the shattered mirror's reflection on the recliner, Lumian, though still affected by the ravings and shrieks, fared better than Franca.
His extensive experience with advancing Sequences and invoking boons where he met with more potent and terrifying murmurs had fortified his resistance against such assaults.
Despite the excruciating headache, scattered thoughts, and ruptured capillaries in various places, he retained some semblance of instinctual reaction and basic cognition. His face contorted grotesquely amidst the blood, but he held on.
In the next moment, the Wraith disappeared from the recliner and manifested within Lumian's blue eyes.
His mind instantly fogged, and his body grew frigid, as if his very blood had turned to ice.
Still capable of thought, Lumian promptly utilized his spirit world traversal ability to escape the room, teleporting several hundred meters away.
He understood that a Marionettist couldn't naturally transform into a Wraith, and the Wraith that possessed him was likely a marionette. With their distinctive combat styles, it was improbable for a Marionettist to engage directly. Therefore, once the marionette was beyond the Marionettist's range, it would lose control and become useless.

When the time came, Lumian would "teleport" back and attempt to take Franca away.
While this would leave him essentially incapacitated, it would also disable Loki's marionette. The adversary would then need to decide whether to launch a direct assault or retreat cautiously, as he couldn't predict how many teleportations Lumian's spirituality could endure—a capability unusual for a Pyromaniac. Loki's assessment might not be entirely accurate in this regard!
Just as Lumian was on the verge of activating his spirit world traversal mark, he heard a magnetic voice: "Give up."
The words pierced Lumian's Spirit Body, disrupting his intentions.
Subsequently, his thoughts grew sluggish, and his body stiffened.
The magnetic voice chuckled softly.
"I don't know what kind of trap you've set in your room, but it likely involves Hela, doesn't it? After all, without her cooperation, you couldn't have masqueraded as Muggle and infiltrated the Research Society, could you? Lumian Lee, Aurore Lee's brother, I've seen your wanted poster."
"In Trier, the easiest Beyonder to come into contact with is from the Hunter pathway. That's why there's a saying:
"'Never fight a Hunter on his turf.'
"No one knows what sort of strange traps Hunters have laid in their 'turf.'
"I didn't want to take that risk, nor did I plan to face Hela directly. Although I'm not overly concerned about her unless she's found a way to become a demigod, why would I engage her on a Hunter's 'turf'? My choice was to stage a surprise attack on Hidden Blade, drawing you out and away from your turf to fight on a ground of my choosing.
"After this afternoon's reconnaissance, I confirmed that both of you possess an item capable of monitoring each other's condition or a mysticism connection—likely the exchange of Mirror Substitution. Heh heh, ever wonder what my other marionette was doing during that time?
"In truth, I have no intention of killing Hidden Blade or turning her into a marionette. A living Demoness serves my purposes better. I can use this encounter to make her suffer and despair. When she advances to Sequence 4 using that, I'll have a demigod marionette..."
The voice carried no provocation, yet each word ignited a burning rage within Lumian.
These words continued to disrupt Lumian's mind and Spirit Body, interfering with his abilities. With the dual constraints of Wraith possession and Marionettist, Lumian resembled a statue, unable to

speak or move. He stood frozen, awaiting the inexorable verdict of fate.
A thin gray fog enveloped the room, sealing off all sound from the outside world.
The magnetic voice chuckled again, its taunting words continuing.
"It really shouldn't have been so complicated, but you see, you have a high-ranking individual sealed within you. To ensure my own safety, the only option is to turn you into a marionette. I have no desire to face a high-ranking being after your demise. Who knows if he'll thank me or finish me along the way?
"Curious how I recognized you, aren't you? It's highly unlikely that others would sense the seal within you, but in my eyes, it's as conspicuous as a firefly in the night. The moment you entered the room with the typewriter, I knew you were the one impersonating Muggle. So, unless you could maintain a considerable distance from me, like the first time you tried to evade my tracking, I could have followed you without the aid of my marionette.
"Indeed, when you showed up at the gathering and joined our April Fool's team, I sensed that something was amiss. I suspected that Muggle had used a seal to escape the fragmentation of her soul. Little did I know, she was truly deceased. You are her brother...
"Haha, I still remember, in the latter part of last year, every time she attended a gathering, she sought out I Know Someone to treat her psychological issues and the hidden dangers arising from the improper use of the Soul Summoning Spell. And I Know Someone would divulge her pain, struggles, vulnerabilities, and transformations to all of us each time.
"It's quite vile, completely against a doctor's principles, but it's fun and interesting. It gave us a sense of accomplishment and made us all laugh."
Upon hearing this, Lumian's mind buzzed.
He had been mildly annoyed by Loki's earlier critiques, but now, as Loki recounted Aurore's experiences, his anger reached a boiling point.
Aurore had been genuinely unwell, seeking treatment from a doctor. However, not only did this doctor patronize her, but he also derived amusement from her suffering. He repeatedly violated her privacy, sharing her struggles and illnesses with others, leading them to mock her behind her back.
What made it all the more despicable was that this group of individuals had sold Aurore the Soul Summoning Spell.
Dammit!
Every single one... of them... deserves death!
They deserve... the most tragic way... of death!

Though Lumian's mind remained ensnared in stasis, his anger finally erupted. It surged through his spirit and coursed into his flesh.
He couldn't control it, not under the constant interference.
Crimson flames erupted from Lumian's body, and small red tendrils protruded from his eyes, radiating a malevolent blood-red hue.
It was a precursor to losing control. If this continued, he would truly lose control.
But Lumian felt no fear. Instead, he cooperated.
Even if I... lose control and turn into a monster... or a lunatic... I will... drag you... all of you... into the abyss!
Relying on his body's "instinctive reaction," crimson flames spread in all directions, incinerating the Wraith, igniting furniture, and causing a fire.
Unfortunately, this fiery onslaught proved ineffective against the Wraith-form marionette and Loki, who remained concealed somewhere beyond reach of the flames.
Its sole purpose, for those brief two seconds, was to disrupt the magnetic voice.
"It's useless. I know you mainly aim to use the flames to signal for help from the outside world rather than attacking me directly. But I've previously deceived Hidden Blade. Despite my claims of accelerating the progress, I actually harnessed the power of the gray fog to create a unique environment that isolates information here.
"While you can indeed break through the residual fog barrier if you go all out since I can't ask for too much power, I can't allow that."
As Loki finished speaking, a frenzied, terrifying, violent, and exaggerated aura exploded from Lumian's body. It shredded the thin fog and shot skyward.

Chapter 388: An Unquiet Night

As the frenzied and violent aura surged out of the thin gray fog, 6 Rue des Blouses Blanches trembled slightly, as if in shock.

In the various rooms of the building, the bodies of those who were already sound asleep involuntarily trembled, plunging into a blood-red nightmare. Those who were still awake looked around in surprise and confusion, as if they had been transported back to a time when barricades were everywhere and gunshots echoed through the air.

On a bed in a quiet room diagonally below Franca's apartment, a man whose eyes had been tightly shut, seemingly asleep, suddenly snapped awake. He gazed up warily and fearfully at the source of the terrifying aura.

At the same time, beneath Église Saint-Robert, within the market district's Inquisition's office,

Angoulême de François, who was on night duty, leaped to his feet and prepared to rush to the area where mystical items were sealed. He hoped to enhance his ability to handle accidents and disasters in a short period.

In other rooms, Imre, Valentine, and the others also sensed the violent aura that seemed to shake all of Trier. Some trembled, while others turned pale.

This was even more terrifying than the Tree of Shadow disaster.

However, they didn't stand still. Some dashed out of the room to rendezvous with Angoulême, while others raised their arms and hastily prayed to the Sun before sprinting toward the Église Saint-Robert above.

Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, 11 Rue des Fontaines.

Gardner Martin, who had been stroking his full-body armor, furrowed his brow and cast a puzzled glance toward the southeastern region.

He felt something calling to him, causing his blood to boil.

Deep underground in Trier, Olson, the starved bear-like man who had been lugging a small brown suitcase, suddenly perked up his ears to listen for any nearby movements.

The distant sounds of killings and shouts faintly reached him.

The Supervisor of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's eyes flashed with ferocity and madness. He extended his right hand and pressed it against his neck.

An indiscernible thread emerged, emitting fiery blood.

In the island district at the center of the Srenzo River, the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Saint Vième cathedral was already shrouded in darkness. Only the nearby bell tower remained lit, but at that

moment, the slumbering cathedral suddenly bathed in brilliant sunlight.
Sunlight flooded the onion-like domes, illuminating every stained glass window.
To the north of Trier, in the heart of the cathedral district, towering iron-black chimneys loomed above the God of Steam and Machinery's patriarchal cathedral.
Rumbling sounds echoed as the massive steam engine installed within the cathedral roared to life. Vast amounts of pale-white fog billowed forth from the forest-like chimneys, enshrouding the night sky.
In Quartier Éraste, a small town very close to the Sacred Heart Cloister, a golden retriever and the lady beside it turned and gazed into the distance of Trier's metropolis.
Within Red Swan Castle, Count Poufer, already lying on his bed, opened his eyes.
He sensed the entire ancient castle become extremely oppressive, and nightmarish roars and screams echoed from deep underground.
At that moment, the Beyonders in the market district and powerful figures elsewhere in Trier were distracted by the undisguised and flamboyant aura of madness.
Hidden in a room diagonally below Franca's apartment, Loki had just reacted to the violent and terrifying aura. Before he could summon back the Wraith that had possessed Lumian and use it to escape through the spirit world with him out of caution, the surrounding darkness instantly intensified, swallowing the crimson moonlight and bringing an extreme calmness to the area.
He couldn't resist closing his eyes; he wasn't even aware of it. He tumbled backward onto the bed and fell into a deep slumber.
Lumian's thoughts returned to normal. He channeled his anger, pouring all his pent-up emotions into the crimson flames.
"Go to hell!"
With a low growl, he took a left step forward, his eyes protruding with red vessels while twisting his waist and swinging his right fist with all his might.
With a muffled explosion, the flames on Lumian's body coalesced on the surface of his fist, naturally condensing into a blazing white fireball.
The blazing white fireball shot from Lumian's right fist, following a predetermined path, and crashed into the wall beside the apartment.
The voice he had just heard emanated from behind the wall!
Boom!

A large hole tore through the wall, revealing a man standing in the corridor.
He had brown hair, brown eyes, and a gaunt face. He was the marionette Loki had employed that evening.
He was the one who had been speaking!
Before Lumian could realize that he hadn't found the real Loki, darkness surged over him like a tidal wave, engulfing him.
Having already vented his anger and flames, Lumian's heart quickly calmed. He subconsciously closed his eyes and slowly sank to the ground.
His contorted face began to relax, and his body and soul found peace.
He no longer showed any signs of losing control.
Dressed in a black widow-like dress and a veiled bonnet, Hela emerged from the darkness.
Being the closest to the apartment while searching for traces of the battle between Loki and Lumian, she was undoubtedly the first to arrive.
Without hesitation, she made Lumian, Franca, Loki, and the two marionettes vanish.
Her figure faded, and the dense darkness rapidly dissipated.
Apart from the collapsed wall, no evidence remained at the scene.
Two seconds later, the apartment was suddenly bathed in sunlight.
...
In an uninhabited mine beneath Trier.
Lumian, Franca, and company swiftly materialized.
They were all in a deep slumber, except for Hela. Her pale face remained conscious as she stood to the side.
The vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society no longer had the dry, withered hair she'd had before. It had transformed into smooth strands, now bearing the color of the night.
She pulled out a flask filled with liquor and downed a third of its contents before fixing her gaze on Lumian.
Hela's forehead began to crack silently, emitting an eerie, ancient glow that manifested into an indescribable, ancient bronze door.
The door swayed and creaked, revealing a narrow gap. Beyond it lay endless darkness, filled with countless dense, indescribable eyes seemingly lurking within.
Under the influence of this deathly aura, the Wraith attached to Lumian flew out without resistance.
In an instant, it landed on the ground, and Hela raised her right hand, pressing it against its forehead. The ancient bronze door

vanished, and the dim light receded into the crack.
Hela shifted her attention to the still-slumbering Loki.
The leader of the April Fool's had an ordinary face, blending into the crowd like any other resident of Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Hela stared at him for a brief moment before her eyes lost focus.
In Loki's dream.
Hela appeared, clad in a black widow-like attire, in front of an ancient castle shrouded in a thin gray fog.
The castle's massive doors stood wide open, eerily silent like the entrance to a cemetery.
Hela glanced up at the pitch-black castle with its numerous spires and thin form before stepping through the door. She passed through the dimly lit atrium, and proceeded into the hall, where peculiar chandeliers with unknown light sources hung.
Numerous guests filled the hall, their expressions frozen like wax statues, unmoving.
Surrounded by dozens or even hundreds of wax statues was a gray platform with three stone steps. In the middle of the platform was an ancient dark-red chair.
A man in his late twenties occupied the seat.
He wore a silk top hat and a black tailcoat, with dark-gray eyes and short, brown hair. Under his high nose bridge, the subtle curl of his mouth hid a non-obvious smile.
Pressing down on the armrests on both sides, the man relaxed and leaned back in his chair.
"Who are you?" His voice echoed through the ancient castle, as if questioning Hela.
Hela walked past the crowd suspected to be wax statues and arrived in front of the man.
Her cold voice remained impassive as she inquired, "Loki, don't you recognize me?"
Loki's grin intensified.
"Hela, you've come after all..."
Seizing the opportunity presented by his dream state, Hela confronted him directly.
"Why did you harm a member of the Research Society?"
Loki's gaze shifted upwards, and he let out a laugh.
"The only purpose those fools serve is to amuse us.
"You must know that the apocalypse is imminent, just a few years away. They're all destined to die, sooner or later. It's better for them to sacrifice themselves now to provide us with entertainment."
Hela fell silent, and a chilling silence enveloped the dream, the air growing colder. Decaying, pale-white hands extended from the

stone floor and surrounding walls.
After a few moments, Hela spoke again.
"Why did you harm Muggle?"
Loki's laughter ceased abruptly, replaced by a smirk as he looked at Hela.
"Because..."
His expression shifted suddenly, and Hela sensed imminent danger within the dream.
"Because the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings..."
Loki's voice faded rapidly, and the entire dream began to crumble under Hela's will. The ancient castle disintegrated into fragments, vanishing into an eerie, yet pure darkness.
Back in the real world, deep within the uninhabited mine beneath Trier, Hela opened her eyes. Countless tiny creatures wriggled beneath her pale-white skin.
In an instant, her form shifted and reassembled, no longer exhibiting the eerie abnormalities she had displayed earlier.
Loki's body had disintegrated into a pool of flesh and blood, with grotesque maggots crawling in and out of it. Hela observed silently, but no Beyonder characteristics emerged from the remains.
...
Within the pitch-black castle enveloped in a thin fog, a dark-red coffin lay in a sinister chamber.
Suddenly, a pale-white hand emerged from the coffin, gripping its wooden edge.

Chapter 389: Suspected God

In the uninhabited quarry cave beneath Trier.

Hela observed as the transparent and distorted maggots perished, yet she didn't detect any Beyonder characteristics emerging.

She turned her attention to Lumian and Franca, who were sound asleep. Satisfied that they had regained control thanks to the night and their dreams, and their breathing had steadied, she ended her forced slumber.

Two seconds later, Lumian's eyes shot open, and he leaped up with the agility of a leopard.

In an instant, he summoned three crimson flames that illuminated the cavern.

As he kept a vigilant watch over his surroundings, Franca, still recovering from severe mental injuries, rubbed her head and slowly got to her feet, fear in her eyes.

Then, she spotted Hela in her distinctive black widow-like dress and the familiar bonnet with a veil. She blurted out, "Madame Hela, what brings you here?"

Instant regret washed over her. She had inadvertently revealed her affiliation with the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

If she hadn't spoken, she could have pretended to be nothing more than a friend of Ciel—that she wasn't Hidden Blade.

"Hidden Blade?" Hela inquired.

Franca let out a dry laugh.

"Yes, how did you recognize me?"

"You're the only Demoness in the Research Society," Hela replied calmly.

Franca felt even more embarrassed and replied ridiculously, "I recognized you based on your attire and demeanor. You never showed your face at the gatherings."

As the two acknowledged each other, Lumian's wariness visibly eased. With Madame Hela's presence, he felt his safety was assured.

Then, he noticed the two marionettes lying lifeless on the ground, surrounded by a pool of flesh infested with translucent maggots.

"Is that Loki?" Lumian pointed at the grotesque, horrifying mass.

Hela cast her gaze over.

"Yes."

Lumian fell silent for a moment before asking, "Is he dead?"

Hela nodded slightly and said, "He succumbed to his own loss of control, but it's not a complete demise."

"Huh?" Franca asked in confusion.

Look at how badly minced he is. Maggots are crawling out, but he's

not completely dead?
She had already figured out why Madame Hela had appeared. Ciel, that scoundrel, must have used her as bait again and written a letter to Madame Hela to clean up the mess!
Hela looked at Lumian and said coldly, "High-level Demonesses aren't the only ones capable of resurrection; high-level Seers can do it too. Loki likely worships an evil god in this domain. Combined with his uniqueness, he can abandon his body upon death and revive in a pre-prepared location with his characteristics intact.
"Unfortunately, I didn't foresee this. If I had prayed for true Concealment in advance, he wouldn't have been able to revive, and he'd leave behind his Beyonder traits."
The woman calmly recounted her oversights, offering no excuses and showing no frustration.
Lumian's eyes remained fixed on the grotesque mass of flesh infested with dead maggots, a slow smile spreading across his face.
The corners of his mouth curled upward as he remarked, "Not bad at all. If he were to meet his end like this, I'd be disappointed. How can I not be the one to kill him with my own hands?"
As Lumian spoke, a burning desire for High-Sequence Beyonder powers ignited within him.
Loki was undeniably formidable. Even when he and Franca had joined forces, Loki had come dangerously close to turning Lumian into a marionette. Yet, Hela, suspected to have advanced to Sequence 4, had effortlessly dispatched him in less than ten seconds.
Lumian understood that unleashing the Blood Emperor aura would undoubtedly draw the attention of official Beyonders from the market district, possibly prompting them to seek assistance from the Churches' saints. Therefore, after Hela had sought him out, she had to subdue Loki and relocate him within ten seconds. Otherwise, the chance of being intercepted by Trier's saints and angels was exceedingly high.
This was what a demigod was like!
Lumian eagerly looked forward to summarizing more Pyromaniac acting principles and digesting the potion over the next two to three months. His goal was to attempt an advancement to Conspirer. He recollected his plans for revenge against Loki and the others, the eradication of heretics, and his insatiable thirst for mystical, high-end powers.
Seeing Lumian's lack of regret or disappointment, replaced instead by an unwavering fighting spirit, Hela subtly nodded in approval.

Lumian's gaze remained fixed on Loki's corpse.
"Which evil god does he worship?"
Franca's heart skipped a beat at this question. She turned to Hela and asked, "Could it be..."
The Demoness of Pleasure paused briefly before switching to a complicated language that Lumian couldn't understand.
"The Immortal Lord..."
Hela abruptly cut her off.
"Have you forgotten that I don't understand that language either?"
"Uh..." Franca couldn't help but slap her forehead.
My pig brain!
Hela continued, "Speak in ancient Feysac or Intisian. Also, remember, pause after each line and tell me something else."
Franca quickly acknowledged her instructions, organized her thoughts, and began speaking in ancient Feysac.
"The Immortal Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings..."
Hela interrupted her once again and engaged in a brief discussion about Loki's assault.
Franca continued, "The Sky Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings..."
Lumian, paying close attention, began to grasp the purpose of Madame Hela's request.
It was a precaution to prevent Franca from reciting the evil god's full honorific name and potentially attracting unwanted attention.
"The Exalted Thearch of Heaven and Earth for Blessings..." Franca repeated the third line and massaged her temples. "When I heard Loki recite it, it felt like I had been transported to another world. Everything was shrouded in fog, and I couldn't discern anything clearly. My thoughts slowed to a crawl. I vaguely recall that there should be another phrase."
Hela chimed in with her own addition in ancient Feysac, "The Celestial Worthy. Of Heaven and Earth. For Blessings."
This time, she even paused the simple line twice.
Lumian couldn't help but express his confusion. "This name has a rather odd style."
It differed significantly from the honorific names of deities like Mr. Fool, the Eternal Blazing Sun, and others he was familiar with. The format and words gave off the impression of belonging to a distinct civilization.
Franca furrowed her brow in thought.
"Now that you mention it, I recall something."
Lumian inquired, "What is it?"
Franca was about to speak but then abruptly closed her mouth.
She looked at Hela with a sheepish smile.

"Do you mind if I assisted Ciel in infiltrating the Research Society to investigate the April Fool's team?"
"He had my approval," Hela replied calmly.
Franca maintained her "submissive" smile.
"Then, would you mind if I had shared the secret of our transmigration with Ciel?"
Hela fell silent for a few moments before responding, "Does it matter if I mind now? Should I Conceal both of you?"
Franca suddenly realized that this situation might not be entirely negative and hastily explained, "You see, the April Fool's team is under suspicion for Muggle's death, and there's no way around revealing our secret when investigating them. That's why I told Ciel about it. Besides, Ciel has genuinely helped us find clues related to transmigration and the possibility of returning to our world!"
She wore an expression as if she had already made up for her mistake.
"What clues?" Hela blurted out for the first time.
Franca exhaled and said, "This is somewhat complex. Let me start by recalling what those honorific names reminded me of.
"We've been communicating, trying to find commonalities and similarities in what each of us did before transmigration to uncover the reason. Some received mysterious phones, others entered abandoned ancient temples in the mountains, and some were studying folklore culture. But I can't pinpoint what I did that led to it. It's not that I can't remember, but I've done so much.
"As you all know, I enjoy novelty. I buy new phones, play new games, try out new restaurants, and even create clothing and cosplay at major conventions. I engaged in a multitude of activities before transmigrating, making it difficult to determine which one triggered the transmigration.
"However, when I heard the honorific name Loki recited, I recalled that on that particular night, I had played a new video game called 'Terror Attack.' In the game, there was a hidden monster that had faith in something called the 'Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth.'"
Though Lumian didn't comprehend the concept of a "video game," he grasped the essence of Franca's explanation.
Her transmigration in this world appeared to be connected to the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings, whom Loki worshiped!
Hela, her light-blond hair flowing naturally over her shoulders, listened attentively and contemplated for a moment before speaking, "I don't have similar recollections. As I mentioned

earlier, before transmigrating, I delved into non-mainstream mythological books. There was a deity skilled in deception and pranks who bore a striking resemblance to Loki..."
Franca's eyes gleamed with insight as she ventured a hypothesis.
"Could Loki have transmigrated by reciting the four lines of the honorific name? So, upon his arrival in this world, he recollected his actions from that time and attempted to recreate them, forging a connection with that evil god?
"Yes, he spoke vaguely when discussing such matters. The members of the April Fool's team shared a similar experience...
"Could it be that we were all brought here by the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings? Or did He summon us to this world?
"He's highly suspicious!"
Hela contemplated this for a moment and nodded slightly.
"At our next gathering, we can revisit this topic and communicate with others with a clearer focus."
Franca was taken aback.
"Will the members of the April Fool's team still attend?"
"The problematic ones probably won't," Hela replied calmly. "Even if we hastily arrange a gathering now, we'd have to notify them individually. This period of time is sufficient for Loki to revive and alert his associates."
Lumian raised his eyebrows.
"Why does everyone need to be notified individually? Just invite the April Fool's team to an emergency meeting. They won't know if others will attend. It won't take long to inform a dozen of them."

Chapter 390: Hidden Danger

Hela glanced at Lumian and fell silent for two seconds before saying, "Alright, I'll get ready now.

"But don't get your hopes up. No matter how urgent the gathering is, you have to give others ten minutes to disguise themselves. Otherwise, they probably won't come."

Ten minutes, combined with the discussion they just had, was enough time for Loki to revive and alert his accomplices.

Lumian's expression remained unchanged as he nodded gently. "We have to give it a try."

"That's right. Capture as many as we can. With an incisive point, it'll be much easier to find the others," Franca agreed with Lumian.

She suspected that Loki and his crew were responsible for the deaths of some members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

Without wasting any more time, the surroundings around Hela suddenly darkened, resisting the light of the three flames.

Her figure vanished without a trace.

This marked the beginning of preparations for the emergency gathering.

Lumian's eyes flickered as he gazed at the decaying flesh teeming with dead maggots, lost in his own thoughts.

Franca carefully examined her body and realized that there were no substantial or obvious injuries. The pain she had previously endured was a result of the impact on her mind. As her Spirit Body was soothed and treated, only faint cracks remained.

Franca let out a long sigh of relief and said, "Loki is truly cunning and powerful. Fortunately, you thought to seek Madam Hela's help. Otherwise, we might have become his marionettes by now."

Lumian wholeheartedly agreed.

If he hadn't considered borrowing Hela's power and guessed that Loki could detect a certain trait in him, leading to the decision to bait him out tonight, perhaps the outcome wouldn't have been in their favor.

When they were unprepared, Loki had approached them and attacked with full force. Neither he nor Franca could retaliate.

He could still use the Blood Emperor's aura, which was relatively easy to activate and didn't require complicated procedures, to attract all official Beyonders. Then, he could exploit the time difference to escape using "teleportation." However, it would condemn Franca to be controlled.

Of course, without the baiting operation, Lumian might have chosen to leave with Franca by traversing the spirit world and

slipping out of Loki's sight before returning stealthily.
"You don't have to worry about becoming a marionette. Loki wants to groom you into a Sequence 4 Demoness," Lumian casually reassured Franca.
Franca was taken aback.
"He told me he's been yearning for a Demoness marionette for a long time..."
Lumian calmly pointed out that Franca had been deceived. "He lied to you. He even said that the four-line honorific name meant to accelerate the progress was, in fact, a trap for me that could isolate most of the struggling commotions."
"..." Franca couldn't help but curse. "Dammit! Is there any truth in his words? As expected of the leader of April Fool's, the new-age swindler who lives diagonally opposite Salle de Bal Unique!"
Franca muttered to herself, "The honorific name he recited must be real. Him being able to use the traits we share and the power of that Celestial Worthy to directly locate me should be real too. As for the exact range, given the style he displayed, there's a high chance that it's nonsense. It can't be believed.
"What kind of traits could it be...
"If the transmigration was indeed caused by that Celestial Worthy, it's very likely that we have His aura or brand on us. And with His power, Loki can easily locate us within a certain range."
Franca suddenly turned to look at Lumian.
"Loki should have recognized that you were fake during the gathering! You don't have the aura or mark of the Celestial Worthy on you!"
"Yes." Lumian's mood sank.
"I'll have to share this detail with Madam Hela later and see if anyone can come up with a way to eliminate the Celestial Worthy aura on them. Otherwise, they'll be hunted down by Loki and the others in the future," Franca said as she looked at the Wraith that had a dark-green light seeping out and merging with a certain part of the corpse. "What should we do with this Beyonder characteristic?"
This was a Sequence 5 Beyonder characteristic!
She had her own thoughts about this spoil of war, but she didn't know Lumian's attitude.
"Madam Hela killed Loki herself, so the spoils of war must belong to her," Lumian said nonchalantly.
He then pointed at the corpse of the other marionette.
"Why hasn't he manifested any Beyonder characteristics?"
"That's right. He can't be resurrected too, can he?" Franca muttered. "Could it be that he's a bestowed who doesn't have Beyonder

characteristics?"
Her plan was to give Madame Hela the Wraith Beyonder characteristic.
Lumian nodded slowly.
"In the evening, I thought he was a marionette of the Sun pathway. Later, when I was under his control, every word he spoke sounded like crazy ravings. It could affect my mind and Spirit Body, which was different from the Sun pathway's style. Yes, he should be a bestowed of an evil god, made into a marionette by Loki."
"I'll ask Madam Hela later." Just as Franca finished speaking, Hela's figure in a black widow-like dress outlined itself in the empty mine.
She said to Lumian and Franca, "In five minutes, we'll recite the incantation and enter the Nation of the Evernight's palace."
"Alright." Lumian took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.
Franca immediately informed Hela about the possible common trait among the members of the Research Society. Finally, she asked, "Is there a way to confirm and eliminate it? A Marionettist like Loki lurks in the shadows and can find us at any moment. It's truly terrifying."
Hela pondered for a moment and replied, "Firstly, advance to Sequence 4 and become a demigod. Only then can you barely suppress the aura left behind by Celestial Worthy. Secondly, search for mystical items with hidden and secret-keeping effects.
"I can only think of these two solutions at the moment. I'll see if anyone else has a better idea at the next gathering."
At that moment, Lumian looked at Hela and asked anxiously, "Madame, did you find out anything from Loki?"
Hela took out a flask and downed another third.
Her pale-white face flushed as she said coldly, "When I asked Loki why he wanted to harm the other members, he said it was for fun and to create pranks to satisfy his emotions and mind. However, when I asked him why he wanted to harm Muggle, his answer was Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings..."
Hela didn't finish her sentence, but both of them understood what she meant.
Selling the Soul Summoning Spell to Aurore and guiding her to use it on herself seemed to be the will of the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings.
"Why does He want this done... Aurore is only a Sequence 7. She's just a nobody..." Lumian lowered his head and muttered in pain.
Hela replied coldly, "Probably because the original body of Muggle and her family are problematic."
Lumian fell silent for a moment before saying, "Could Loki be

lying? A person full of lies like him might not be telling the truth."
"In the dreamscape I created, he can't lie unless he gains the ability to maintain lucidity in advance, but that's impossible." Hela denied Lumian's guess.
Dreamscape... Franca glanced at Hela and felt that this didn't match her impression of her Sequence pathway.
Lumian fell silent once again.
Aurore's transmigration was suspected to have been brought about by the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings. After her resurrection, she had been targeted by the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings because Roche Louise Sanson and her family were believers in Inevitability. This made Aurore's subsequent encounter seem like a predetermined tragedy.
Seeing this, Franca changed the subject and pointed at the two marionettes' corpses.
"Madame Hela, that Beyonder characteristic is the spoil of war you deserve. What we want to know is why this marionette didn't produce any Beyonder characteristics?"
Hela didn't refuse. As she watched the Wraith Beyonder characteristic emerge, she inquired about Franca and Lumian's feelings when they were controlled.
After a brief exchange, she pondered and said, "This should be a bestowed who believes in an evil god. The corresponding Sequence 7 is an Orator, and Sequence 6 is a Singer. These two Sequences can transmit different mystical powers with their voices, matching your descriptions.
"In addition, Beyonders of this pathway often perform secret deed rituals at Sequence 9 and obtain mysteries and knowledge through a formless door. Different people hear and experience different things, and the subsequent abilities they obtain will be different. Being able to use singing to create a sun's blinding effect should be one of these manifestations."
"Which evil god?" Franca blurted out.
Hela shook her head.
"I don't know the exact honorific name either. It's dangerous for us to know anyway.
"I've encountered His believers. They sometimes refer to this evil god as the First Philosophy or Arcane Controller."
Without waiting for Franca to ask further, Hela nodded slightly and said, "We should head to the gathering."
Lumian and Franca recited the incantation simultaneously.
"A Beyonder from ancient times, Ruler of the Nation of the Evernight, noble Mother of the Sky, I beseech your permission to enter your kingdom."

As the surrounding darkness and slumber dissipated, Lumian and Franca arrived at the ancient and dilapidated palace again.
There was no one here yet. It was empty and silent.
Franca felt that something was amiss. After thinking for more than ten seconds, she realized something.
"We haven't disguised ourselves!"
Just as she finished speaking, she saw Lumian shrouded in a hazy dream-like fog, obscuring his exact form and appearance.
Lumian then used the Niese Face to transform himself into a hooded Muggle clad in a Warlock's black robe.
With Madame Hela's help, Franca breathed a sigh of relief and waited patiently for the April Fool's team to arrive.
As time ticked by, two figures suddenly outlined inside the silent palace.

Chapter 391: Idiots

The figures entering the ancient palace were Black Earth and Bax. Black Earth sported a furry hat and a thick leather mask, while Bax, on the other hand, had opted for just shorts and a brass mask. Upon spotting Hela, they acknowledged her with a slight nod as a greeting.

Their eyes then roved over Franca, who hadn't tagged her code name, and Muggle, enveloped in a dreamy mist.

"Who's this?" Black Earth, clad like a Hunter from the mountains, pointed at Franca, a note of confusion in his voice.

"Hidden Blade. I rushed and forgot to tag myself," Franca replied.

Black Earth and Bax promptly dropped their suspicions and relaxed.

In a situation like this emergency gathering, it was perfectly normal for Hidden Blade to slip up.

This was her style!

Soon after, other members of the April Fool's team arrived one by one, but Lumian didn't see the five most suspicious targets— I Know Someone, Hisoka, Bard, Mad Lady, and Ultraman.

His expression darkened gradually, sensing that Loki had been resurrected and the problematic members had been alerted.

The dozen or so individuals gathered here were potential pawns. If Loki and his gang went too far and were discovered by other members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, they could be used as scapegoats for the investigation.

There was nothing to find fault with them, thus ensuring the six true believers in the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings remained concealed.

At that moment, Black Earth and the rest started to realize that something was amiss.

Why were there so few attendees at the emergency gathering?

The agreed time had already passed, and typically, at least half of the society should have shown up by now.

"Hela, what's going on?" Bax, wearing nothing but a mask and shorts, asked in a deep voice.

Lumian sneered, looking at them as if they were a bunch of fools.

If Loki and his crew were evil, then these people were simply fools. They believed they were clever and had uncovered the truth, thinking they were indulging in pre-apocalypse pleasures. In reality, they were just being used as pawns and shields.

Lumian was willing to bet that Loki, I Know Someone, and the other core members of the April Fool's team would mock these fools during their private gatherings.

Hela's tone remained as cold as ice as she began, "I summoned you to this gathering because Loki betrayed us."
Black Earth, Bax, and the others were taken aback. They glanced around, but Loki was nowhere to be seen.
Hela continued, "He believes in an evil god and led I Know Someone and the others to harm numerous Research Society members."
"Such accusations require evidence," Bax instinctively retorted.
With the Lie earring on, Lumian spoke in Aurore's voice, "I'm the evidence!
"You must have seen me buy the Soul Summoning Spell. This caused a mental problem and nearly caused me to lose control. Fortunately, I found someone to help me in time and sealed my split personality.
"Before this, I've been seeking treatment from I Know Someone, but instead of improving, my condition only worsened.
"I approached them to reason with them, but they ended up planning to murder me!"
Black Earth fell silent for a moment before saying, "I remember that you bought it from Mad Lady. They lied to you because transmigration should be a matter between two parties, not a one-sided reason. Otherwise, why did you transmigrate to this world and happen to possess such people? The original bodies must have done something to establish the connection between the two worlds. Therefore, before figuring out what caused you to transmigrate, finding the remnant soul of the original body and asking might gain something unexpected.
"Muggle, weren't you homesick back then? How could you believe such a reason?"
As they heard this, some of the April Fool's team members present couldn't help but show teasing and mocking expressions in their eyes.
Muggle had fallen for a trick that could only fool children!
None of them had been fooled by Mad Lady. Even if she claimed to have tried and achieved certain results, it couldn't be considered a clue.
Mad Lady... Lumian repeated the code name inwardly.
A chuckle escaped him as he continued, "I was indeed blinded by the desire to return home, but you weren't any better.
"Take a look. Are Loki, Mad Lady, and Bard here?
"They know what they're doing, and they understand that if they're exposed, they have to leave the Research Society immediately. But you, fools, and idiots, don't know anything and are still cooperating with them!

"Even pigs and dogs are smarter than you!"
The absence of Loki and the others was like Muggle's mocking arrow, piercing the hearts and minds of Black Earth and the other April Fool's team members.
Some of them erupted in anger, feeling humiliated and wanting to retort. Others swayed in despair and confusion, while some felt as if countless insects were gnawing at their hearts. The pain was palpable.
Witnessing this, Franca entered Instigation mode and delivered a decisive blow.
"Don't you understand? You're discarded pawns, abandoned targets, mere agents who have lost their usefulness!
"You've never been core members of April Fool's. You've never earned Loki's trust. They only mock you behind your backs!
"Now that Loki and the others have been exposed, they can hunt down the Research Society members without fear. Who do you think will be the easiest for them to locate and target?
"The only thing you can do is recall the details of your dealings with Loki and the others, including the real-life pranks you executed, so that we can eliminate these traitors as soon as possible.
"Remember, leniency comes with honesty, resistance comes with severity."
Black Earth, Bax, and the others followed Hidden Blade's logic and realized the grim possibility.
They exchanged glances, their hearts clearly wavering. The few who had witnessed Loki and the others' capabilities couldn't help but tremble slightly.
Finally, Franca dropped a bombshell.
"Don't think you can escape the hunt just because you can relocate. Let me tell you, Muggle's experience indicates that Loki and the others seem to have a way to track Research Society members within a certain range through some mystical connection.
"I'll share the specific method with everyone at the next official gathering."
Black Earth gritted his teeth and said, "There are too many details. I don't think I can recall them all in just a few hours."
The other April Fool's team members nodded in agreement.
Hela thought for a moment and replied, "Go back, write down all the details, and send them to me.
"Remember, pack your belongings and stay at a motel or hotel at least five kilometers away."
Bax and the others let out sighs of relief and agreed.
Shortly after, Lumian noticed their eyes closing, as if they had

fallen asleep while standing.
He and Franca exchanged thoughtful glances and then realized that Madame Hela's eyes had lost focus before closing as well.
After a moment, Hela opened her eyes and said to Lumian and Franca, "There are no hidden Loki helpers or believers in the Celestial Worthy."
This is a precaution in case Loki had risked leaving an accomplice to gather intelligence... Franca came to a realization.
In the next instant, Black Earth, Bax, and the others awakened simultaneously, reciting the incantation discreetly as they left the ancient and decaying palace.
Lumian dispelled the Niese Face, took off the Lie earring, and turned to Hela.
"Every time we use the incantation at a gathering, we should be tainted by the Sealed Artifacts' Concealment aura, right?
"Can we use this to track down Mad Lady and the others?"
Hela shook her head.
"They no longer have the corresponding auras."
Clearly, she had tried it before.
Lumian remained silent, exhaling slowly and silently.
The trio left the Nation of the Evernight and returned to the uninhabited mine beneath Trier.
Hela put away the Wraith Beyonder characteristic and spoke to Lumian and Franca.
"If we can't uncover Loki and truly eliminate him, you can stay in Trier's market district for another three months at most. When that time comes, regardless of any unfinished business, you'll have to consider relocating."
"Why three months?" Franca inquired, her confusion apparent.
Staying even another week seemed perilous.
Hela provided a simple explanation.
"While Loki has been resurrected with his Beyonder characteristics, he has lost all his marionettes. A Marionettist won't rashly appear and attack others without a marionette, unless they are excessively confident and perceive you as weak. And you've already demonstrated significant strength.
"For a Marionettist without a marionette, acquiring a suitable and powerful marionette requires planning, luck, and frequent replacements. You should have a window of three to six months."
"Understood," Franca replied, deciding to inform Madam Judgment that if no progress was made within two months, she would request permission to abandon the Iron and Blood Cross Order mission and relocate.
Lumian nodded in agreement.

He contemplated whether he could digest the Pyromaniac potion within three months and gather the Conspirer potion formula and main ingredients.
At that moment, Hela pointed at Loki's mushy flesh, twisted maggots, and said, "The dead worms are excellent spiritual ingredients that can be used for many things. However, they also come with hidden issues. They have been corrupted to a certain extent, posing unknown dangers to you."
Franca recalled her terrifying experience of almost becoming a marionette and shook her head, indicating she didn't want them.
Lumian gazed at the countless maggots and the mushy flesh for a moment before suddenly summoning the crimson fireball floating on his shoulder. He directed it towards Loki's remains.
Instead of exploding, the fireball ignited fiercely, casting a crimson glow.
As he watched the maggots and flesh burn, Lumian felt as though he had digested the Pyromaniac potion once more.
This came from his experience of being controlled by Loki and using the near-loss of control to ignite his own body, triggering the resonance of the Blood Emperor's aura.
This led Lumian to formulate his own acting principle for Pyromaniac: Pyromaniacs aren't arsonists. Only by daring to set themselves ablaze can they set others ablaze!

Chapter 392: Switching Pathways

The digestion of the Pyromaniac potion progressed much faster than Lumian had expected. This quick reaction was likely due to the activation of Blood Emperor Alista Tudor's aura without proper protection, akin to setting a blaze in Trier. The flames burned even the Saint Vièvе Cathedral and the patriarchal cathedral of the God of Steam and Machinery Church.

Hela watched the flesh and maggots consumed by the crimson flames for a moment before turning to Franca.

"Can we now discuss the clues about transmigration?"

Franca tersely acknowledged her words and gathered her thoughts.

"Ciel had previously attempted a unique summoning ritual, which inadvertently brought forth a shadow suspected to be from my homeland, the one I share with Muggle. He even formed a contract with this entity.

"After discovering this, I had Ciel summon the shadow again to communicate with it.

"The shadow's language is remarkably similar to that of my homeland. When asked about its origin, it said, 'The Blood Son of Heaven disrupted the netherworld, and the Underworld Daoist sacrificed himself to enter the river.'"

Franca translated the last sentence into Intisian.

Hela listened attentively and then turned her gaze to Lumian.

"Could this be the apparition of Blood Emperor Alista Tudor?

"Underworld Daoist was the one who dragged Him back?"

"That's our hypothesis," Lumian replied succinctly, indicating that Franca was also aware of the Samaritan Women's Spring. There was no need for excessive secrecy.

"Underworld Daoist..." Hela murmured the term softly.

Franca continued to recount her and Lumian's theories, suspecting that the illusionary river behind the spring might connect to the original world of her and the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members.

Hela remained silent, her dark eyes gleaming with a subtle brilliance, as though concealing a galaxy.

"That covers most of it. Once we've dealt with the traitors in the Research Society, I'll share this information with everyone," Franca said after a brief pause. She also reminded Hela, "Apart from April Fool's, Loki's allies might be lurking in other teams. They tend to participate in activities without playing pranks and only reveal themselves during crucial moments."

Hela nodded slightly and replied, "I'll discuss how to handle this

with Gandalf and the others."
The woman then turned her gaze to Lumian.
"If there's nothing else, I'll take you back to the surface."
Lumian withdrew his gaze from the flames and let out a deep breath.
"I'll take care of this."
He crouched down and placed his hands in front of Loki's lifeless body.
Rumble. Accompanied by a muted explosion and a slight tremor in the ground, the earth, carrying flesh, blood, and maggots, suddenly sank into the mire and rocks.
Franca nodded in realization.
This way, any remaining corruption on Loki's corpse wouldn't be exposed to cave adventurers who might pass by later.
She assisted in carrying the corpses of the two marionettes over, contemplating whether to collect the Wraith's teeth and nails.
These were excellent spiritual ingredients that could be used to forge Beyonder weapons.
If the Wraith had lost control and transformed into a monster, Franca wouldn't feel any psychological burden dealing with his corpse. However, he still retained his human form.
Considering that she didn't lack offensive weapons or poison for coating them, Franca simply harvested the powder from the translucent Wraith and absorbed its residual spirituality.
After removing the clothes bestowed by the evil god and checking for any clues, Franca tossed the two corpses into the blazing pit.
Once she had completed this task, she turned to Hela and asked with curiosity,
"Madame Hela, have you advanced to Sequence 4 and become a demigod?"
Otherwise, how could she have subdued Loki so effortlessly?
"Yes," Hela confirmed with a nod.
Franca pondered for a moment and probed further, "You used to follow the Corpse Collector pathway, but this time, you displayed the power of the Evernight pathway. Did you use a mystical item?"
Was it similar to using a Sealed Artifact to enable everyone to enter the Nation of the Evernight in Concealment and participate in the gathering?
The Corpse Collector pathway was also known as the Death pathway.
Hela's voice was icy as she replied, "I've switched to Sequence 4 Nightwatcher of the Evernight pathway."
"Why?" Franca was intrigued by Hela's choice.
While she had once contemplated switching to the neighboring

Hunter pathway when advancing to Sequence 4, it was mainly to restore her body to its male form. Under usual circumstances, sticking to a single pathway until the end was generally the better choice. After all, the acting acquired in the earlier Sequences were deeply ingrained in that pathway, making it easier and safer to become a Sequence 4 Beyonder of the same pathway.

Of course, if one couldn't find the Sequence 4 potion formula and main ingredient for their pathway, they might consider switching to a neighboring pathway. It wouldn't necessarily lead to half-madness, and they could gain a mix of unique abilities.

Franca had never seen any indication from Hela of wanting to switch pathways. When they discussed and exchanged information at the Research Society, Hela primarily focused on topics related to the Corpse Collector domain. Most of the materials and items gathered and sold were concentrated in this pathway.

Could it be that the Sequence 4 potion formula, main ingredients, or corresponding rituals of the Corpse Collector pathway proved impractical? Franca speculated, drawing on her extensive knowledge of mysticism.

Hela's pale face softened.

She gazed into the darkness beyond the abandoned mine, her voice taking on a contemplative tone.

"If I continued along the Death pathway, the deity I believe in would eventually transform me into a crucial vessel for specific moments."

At this point, Hela wore a rare smile and spoke with a distant look in her eyes.

"It's already a challenge for Her to maintain Her humanity. So, I shouldn't burden Her any further."

Franca was initially perplexed but began to grasp Madame Hela's reasoning for switching pathways.

Hela gave her a brief look and added, "If I can advance to Sequence 3, I should either revert to the Death pathway or switch to the Warrior pathway.

"The upper ranks of the Evernight pathway are facing a severe resource shortage."

"Wow," Franca couldn't help but envision Hela wielding various Sequence abilities from the Evernight, Corpse Collector, and Warrior pathways. She found it both impressive and formidable.

She, too, felt a sense of excitement about the possibility of acquiring the abilities of a Demoness and a Hunter in the future.

Meanwhile, Lumian incinerated Loki's mutated remains and filled the pit.

Hela promptly obscured the area in darkness.
...
When Lumian and Franca regained consciousness, they found themselves outside the abandoned mine near the entrance to Underground Trier on Rue Anarchie.
In the distance, they could hear faint movements coming from Rue des Blouses Blanches.
"Phew, this is the most dangerous situation I've encountered since becoming a Beyonder," Franca said, exhaling deeply and speaking with emotion. "If Loki hadn't used me as bait to lure you here, there's a high chance I would have become a marionette."
Lumian tersely acknowledged her words and remained silent.
He took a step forward and began to walk down the street.
Franca followed him and asked curiously, "Did Loki say anything when he tried to disrupt your mind with his trash talk? Although many of his words may be lies, they might contain valuable information."
For example, the suspicion that every member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society possessed the lingering aura of the Celestial Worthy.
Lumian remained silent for a few moments before responding.
"He recounted how they harmed Aurore, how they repeatedly disclosed her mental state and psychiatric treatment process, and how they shamelessly mocked her..."
His explanation was concise, but the simplicity of his words couldn't mask the anger that rose in him again.
"Huh?" Franca was initially surprised but quickly grasped the gravity of the situation. "That Psychiatrist, I Know Someone?"
Lumian nodded slowly.
Franca contemplated the situation carefully, her anger growing with each passing thought.
"Dammit! How can they be so evil? I fully support you in tearing them apart, dismembering them, skinning them, and stuffing them with grass!" After several seconds of contemplation, she unleashed a curse.
Lumian remained silent, seemingly weighing the feasibility of such actions.
Franca glanced at him and hesitantly suggested, "When you faced the other April Fools' team members earlier, you held back and didn't kill them directly..."
Lumian chuckled.
"Why should I kill those idiots? It's more agonizing, humiliating, and regretful for these individuals who believe they're clever when they realize how Loki and the others manipulated them. It brings

me greater satisfaction than killing them.
"In the future, whenever anyone mentions Loki, it will be akin to insulting their intelligence to their faces, and they won't be able to escape it."
Franca breathed a sigh of relief.
She said to Lumian, "Rue des Blouses Blanches seems quite lively. I plan to stay at Jenna's tonight. Heh heh.
"Yes, I'll be informing my Major Arcana card holder briefly about this matter. I'll convey that if Loki isn't completely eliminated within two months, I would like to request a transfer out of the market district. You, too, can apply to take charge of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's branch elsewhere."
"I'll also write to my Major Arcana card holder," Lumian assured her, indicating that he wouldn't underestimate the potential harm Loki could cause.
Lumian had always maintained a clear distinction between personal matters and official matters. Whether dealing with the padre or investigating Loki, he had never considered seeking Madam Magician's assistance. However, this time, his use of the Blood Emperor's aura had caused quite a commotion, and it would be necessary to report it later.
Seeing that Lumian remained rational, Franca felt at ease. She waved farewell and stealthily made her way toward Quartier du Jardin Botanique.
Lumian averted his gaze and entered Auberge du Coq Doré, walking along the still-warm street.
He had no desire to encounter the official Beyonders who might be searching for clues on Rue des Blouses Blanches at this late hour.
As he pushed open the door to Room 207, Lumian spotted a figure inside.
It was Madam Magician, dressed in an orange waist-length dress and holding a wide-brimmed hat adorned with flowers.
"Were you waiting for me?" Lumian inquired almost instinctively.
Magician smiled.
"What else would I be doing?"
"How did you know I would come back here?" Lumian closed the door.
Magician smiled and said, "This is a revelation of fate.
"Now, tell me, why did you unleash the Blood Emperor's aura?"

Chapter 393: Information About Celestial Worthy

Lumian was taken aback.

"Did it cause a huge commotion?"

He knew that once the Blood Emperor's aura was activated, it would undoubtedly attract the attention of nearby official Beyonders and powerful figures. It would be akin to setting Saint Vièvе Cathedral on fire. The commotion wouldn't be small, but he never expected this to catch the attention of Madam Magician, who didn't seem to be in Trier, for her to rush over.

He had intended to write a letter and report this matter.

Madam Magician nodded seriously.

"Very. It even led some people to believe that the door to Fourth Epoch Trier had opened."

The commotion is even greater than I had imagined. As expected of Blood Emperor Alista Tudor... Lumian wasn't vexed or surprised; instead, he calmly sat on the edge of the bed.

It had already happened, so there was no point in feeling vexed or surprised. Moreover, even if he had to do it again, he would still do it.

Lumian began recounting how he had posed as his sister to infiltrate the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and determine if there was anything amiss with the person who had sold her the Soul Summoning Spell. He continued until Loki lost control and died, but no Beyonder characteristics emerged. It was suspected that there was a way for him to revive. There was also the honorific name of an evil god that Hela and the Two of Cups had pieced together.

Magician didn't interrupt, but the smile on her face had vanished at some point in time.

"Do I need to recite the honorific name's four lines intermittently, or can I just say them?" Lumian finally asked.

Madam Magician's voice was calm as she replied, "Just say it. It won't be a problem as long as you don't use ancient Hermes, Jotun, and other unprotected Beyonder languages."

Lumian subconsciously surveyed the room and realized that it had grown dimmer. Although the crimson moonlight could penetrate the glass window, it seemed to be obstructed by an invisible, soundproof, and deep curtain.

He then repeated Franca's translated honorific name.

With that said, he saw Madam Magician fall silent, as if she had transformed into a statue.

"What's wrong with that?" Lumian probed.

Magician pondered for a moment and looked at him.

"You're saying that you relied on the brink of losing control from your anger to trigger the resonance of the Blood Emperor's aura and create a commotion that can break through the three layers of the thin fog's concealment?"
"That's right," Lumian replied, still feeling a lingering fear as he recalled the situation. "Normally, once my emotions exceed the limit, I would recall the cues left behind by Madam Susie. However, even the corresponding memories became intermittent and vague, preventing the cues from having the desired effect. In fact, if I hadn't held out hope when I was first controlled and instead tried to activate the Blood Emperor's aura immediately, Loki probably wouldn't have been able to truly stop me. When the control deepened, it wouldn't have worked. I could only rely on such passive reactions..."
Madam Magician wore a thoughtful expression and didn't respond.
"Is there a problem with this part of the situation?" Lumian asked bluntly.
Magician nodded slightly and said, "There's nothing wrong with this detail. It's very reasonable. It's a normal development of the situation back then. The problem is that you just obtained the Blood Emperor's aura not long ago, so it came in handy."
Lumian was taken aback for a few seconds before blurting out, "Could Amon have foreseen my encounter tonight by stuffing the Earth Blood ore into my pocket? Is His purpose to help me?"
Help that nearly got me killed?
"This might be just one of the goals, and it's not His," Madam Magician said with a soft sigh. "It's the goal of the one who's roughly equivalent to His father."
Lumian was taken aback once more.
"The one the Aurora Order believes in? The one who inherited half of the Ancient Sun God's inheritance?"
For some reason, Mr. K's maniacal laughter echoed in his mind.
Piousness is the only way out!
Madam Magician muttered to herself, "Previously, I thought I wanted to involve you more deeply in matters related to the Sauron family, the Iron and Blood Cross Order, and the Fourth Epoch Trier. Now, it seems that I'll have to include disrupting that entity's plan..."
Seeing that Lumian still didn't understand why it involved the deity believed in by the Aurora Order, Magician explained, "Do you remember when you thought accepting another Major Arcana card holder's commission was a normal and reasonable matter? You didn't need to tell me?"

"I remember," Lumian replied, not seeing any problem with that. "It's true that I made a mistake, but it has nothing to do with that person. It's a manifestation of my true thoughts."
Madam Magician chuckled.
"Coincidentally, I didn't meet Miss Justice during that time, so there was an information gap."
Lumian's eyes flickered as he caught a whiff of a conspiracy.
Madam Magician continued, "The combination of two coincidences might not be coincidental. Think about the complete honorific name of that entity."
"I can't recall," Lumian admitted. "Madam Justice made a psychological cue. I can only recall it if I pray for Mr. Fool's angelic protection."
"There's no rush. When you can recall, you'll naturally understand the source of the problem," Magician warned him simply. "You have to be vigilant once you encounter too many coincidences."
Lumian nodded solemnly.
Madam Magician consoled him,"There's no need to be too nervous, let alone reject contact with Mr. K. This time, with that entity's arrangements so obvious, He's telling us that He knows, that He is watching and listening.
"This also means that He holds no ill intentions for the time being. Otherwise, not only would you be finished, but I would also be in danger."
Lumian was burdened with numerous issues. He couldn't afford to fret at such a high level. It was pointless to fret. After all, he relied on the Tarot Club the most.
He then inquired, "Madam, which evil god does Loki and company believe in?"
Only by clarifying the evil god's domain and characteristics could he better guard against and deal with His believers in the future.
Magician fell silent for several seconds, so silent that even a Beyonder as bold as Lumian couldn't help but feel his heart race.
Eventually, she let out a sigh and remarked, "Actually, I have mentioned that evil god to you."
"Huh?" Lumian had no impression of such a thing.
Madam Magician fell silent for a few seconds before saying, "I've told you before, Mr. Fool is facing off against an ancient deity. This outcome holds the power to shape our destinies and determine whether our world can survive the impending apocalypse.
"That ancient deity is known as the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings."
"It's actually Mr. Fool's enemy..." Lumian hadn't anticipated such a revelation.

Me branded by Mr. Fool... Aurore, possibly brought to this world by the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings... Loki and his associates, who are devout followers of the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings, sold the Soul Summoning Spell to Aurore, triggering a series of catastrophic events... Mr. Fool is in direct opposition to the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings...

A torrent of information flooded Lumian's mind, leaving him feeling like he was on the verge of unraveling a truth that was still missing crucial details.

Madam Magician pondered for a moment before continuing.

"I've also mentioned that if you address Mr. Fool using anything other than his three-lined honorific name or attempt to invoke him without following the proper ritual, I can't guarantee that he will be the one who responds. It might even lead to perilous encounters.

"Now, I can offer you a clear answer. Under those circumstances, the response you receive could very well be from the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings."

Praying to Mr. Fool in an incorrect manner might gain a response from the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings...

Lumian was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information. His head felt like it was about to burst.

Then, a crucial detail caught his attention.

The title "The King of Yellow and Black" in Mr. Fool's honorific name bore a striking resemblance to Franca's translation of the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings!

With this revelation, a chilling sensation washed over Lumian.

He hesitated for a few seconds before deciding to inquire, "What's the connection between Mr. Fool and the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings?"

Madam Magician offered a wry smile in response.

"What I know isn't that detailed or precise. For example, after the one the Aurora Order believes in inherited half of the Ancient Sun God's inheritance, the Ancient Sun God was resurrected in some way."

Lumian grasped the general idea and let out a relieved sigh.

"It seems to mirror Aurore's association with Roche Louise Sanson."

This facilitated his understanding.

Madam Magician seemed taken aback.

Almost instinctively, she reached out as if attempting to retrieve a drink from thin air, but she restrained herself in the end.

Lumian recounted the entire incident, a hint of pain and deep confusion in his voice.

"What could this Celestial Worthy be planning? Aurore was just a Sequence 7. Even if Roche Louise Sanson and her family are devout followers of Inevitability, they wouldn't be able to do anything of significance..."
Madam Magician sighed once more.
"Perhaps He intends to hasten the arrival of the apocalypse and allow the evil gods beyond the barrier to invade more easily.
"In that case, in order to protect this world and us, its inhabitants, Mr. Fool might consider abandoning the confrontation and permitting the Celestial Worthy's return intact."
Lumian listened in a daze, a sudden thought racing through his mind.
What would happen if Mr. Fool indeed chose to stop resisting the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings?
Magician didn't delve further into the topic.
"I can't share more information at this moment. In short, pursuing Loki and his associates is both your personal vendetta and a shared mission of our Tarot Club. If you're confident, take action on your own. If not, feel free to seek assistance from other Major Arcana card holders at any time to eliminate the minions of the Celestial Worthy to the best of your ability."
With that, the woman stood up, and the room suddenly transformed into a celestial spectacle, filled with twinkling stars.
It felt as if Lumian had been transported into the vast and dazzling cosmos.
The stars revolved continuously, as if conveying a message.
Madam Magician observed them for a moment before remarking, "It's true that divination doesn't reveal Loki's whereabouts or identity after his resurrection, and the others lack sufficient information.
"Once Hela has organized the relevant data, provide me with a copy."

Chapter 394: Eye of the Storm

Lumian was also waiting with anticipation for the abandoned April Fool's team members to recall useful details. He nodded and replied, "Got it."

Madam Magician fixed her gaze on him for a few moments, lost in thought.

"In the future, if I assign you a mission that seems clearly problematic, you have the option to either reject it or discuss it face-to-face with me while discreetly reaching out to other Major Arcana card holders."

"Why?" Lumian was a little confused.

By doing so, isn't Madam Magician implying that something might happen to her?

Magician chuckled self-deprecatingly.

"Because I'm a high-risk individual, susceptible to the influence of the Celestial Worthy.

"The Celestial Worthy holds the highest position in the Seer, Marauder, and Apprentice pathways. The higher the corresponding Beyonder Sequence, the more susceptible one is to His influence. Everyone carries an Oldest One within them, you see. And as a high-level Beyonder of the Apprentice pathway and a believer in The Fool, it's natural for me to occasionally be led astray, fooled, or deceived by the Celestial Worthy.

"Of course, Mr. Fool himself also stands at the pinnacle of these three pathways, which is why he opposes the Celestial Worthy. So, you need not worry about me. Most of the time, I'm under Mr. Fool's influence. There won't be anything wrong with my condition, but occasional anomalies might occur."

It's akin to praying without a ritual or invoking a name beyond those three lines; all of that can draw the Celestial Worthy's attention and invite His response, potentially planting hidden dangers... High-ranking individuals in the Seer, Marauder, and Apprentice pathways are closer to the Celestial Worthy and Mr. Fool. Even if one follows all the usual procedures, there's still a chance that something might go wrong... Lumian grasped Madam Magician's instructions before realizing that her words were revealing mysticism information that defied common sense.

Mr. Fool and the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings could simultaneously hold the pinnacle of three pathways!

Normally, reaching Sequence 0 in a pathway marked one as a true god. So what title did the individual at the peak of three pathways bear? A great existence?

For the first time, Lumian began to comprehend that Mr. Fool and the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings might surpass even true gods like the Eternal Blazing Sun.
Similarly, Amon's father, the Ancient Sun God, must belong to this echelon. After all, half of His inheritance had given rise to the one the Aurora Order believed in.
Soon, Lumian remembered Madam Magician's distinct descriptions of different deities.
Merely knowing of Their existence and invoking Their honorific names could corrupt certain deities, causing Them to undergo mutations or face peril.
Some deities could be mentioned in general terms, as long as one refrained from uttering Their honorific names beyond the three lines of Beyonder language, thus avoiding attracting Their attention.
This likely represents the division among deities... Mr. Fool and the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings occupy three neighboring and interchangeable pathways. Is this a hidden requirement for mastering a composite pathway? Lumian dared not probe further, fearing that knowing too much might lead to unintended consequences.
As for Madam Magician belonging to the Apprentice pathway, he had anticipated it. Aurore's grimoires had mentioned that Sequence 9 Apprentices in this pathway excelled at opening doors. Sequence 7s were known as Astrologers, aligning with Madam Magician's usual behavior and her occasional references to "astrology," "divination," and "fate."
"Understood," Lumian replied. He went on to explain his plan: if he failed to eliminate Loki within two months, he intended to use the Iron and Blood Cross Order's internal processes to relocate from the market district, as well as the problem about concealing the sealed mark on his body.
Magician was very understanding.
"No problem. Although you can also write to me and use yourself as bait, Loki might have the patience to wait a few more months, and I can't always be with you.
"As for the issue of the seal, if you don't actively activate it, only Beyonders of the Seer, Apprentice, and Marauder pathways who believe in the Celestial Worthy can sense it directly. This is different from the uncontrollable aura of the Celestial Worthy.
"If you need something quickly, seek angelic protection from Mr. Fool or write to me. I'll craft a charm that can safeguard secrets.
"That's the best way to manage the Celestial Worthy's aura on the Two of Cups for now. Fortunately, evil gods like the Mother Tree of

Desire no longer pay special attention to people like them."
Lumian breathed a sigh of relief and inquired, "Can I share the information you just mentioned about the Celestial Worthy with the Two of Cups?"
Magician declined his request, explaining, "Her Major Arcana card holder will give her a simplified explanation, but it won't be as clear as what I just said. She doesn't know enough either. If you reveal everything I shared with you, it could put her in danger."
Lumian didn't press further and watched as Madam Magician used starlight to create a dreamy door. She stepped through it and disappeared.
The room's soundproof glass receded to its original state, and the crimson moonlight poured through the window, casting a glow on the table with the carbide lamp.
Lumian settled by the bed, his mind racing, and he couldn't help but recall Loki's description of his exploits against Aurore.
Taking a deep breath, he decided on his next course of action: digesting the Pyromaniac potion!
...
Quartier du Jardin Botanique, Rue Pasteur.
As dawn broke, Franca and Jenna made their way back to the market district along this street.
For the time being, Franca hadn't figured out how to broach the subject of the dangerous situation from last night with Jenna. She used the excuse that Jenna's brother was at home and might overhear them, so she decided to delay the conversation until tonight.
When they returned to Avenue du Marché, Jenna waved goodbye and headed towards Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
However, before she could enter the modified brick-red three-story building, she noticed graffiti in a corner, almost resembling the work of a child.
It served as a sign that the Purifiers were calling for an urgent meeting, complete with time and location details.
Jenna naturally averted her gaze and entered Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
After about fifteen minutes, in her role as the boss's lover, she left through the back door without any hindrance and arrived at a secluded alley near Église Saint-Robert.
Before long, Valentine and Imre appeared.
The former didn't waste time with pleasantries and got straight to the point, asking, "Have you received any news about the terrifying aura from last night?"
Jenna was perplexed.

"What terrifying aura?"
"You didn't sense it?" Imre, who had some Southern Continent heritage, inquired with a furrowed brow. "You didn't experience any nightmares?"
Jenna shook her head.
"I wasn't in the market district last night. I went home to visit my brother."
"Is that so..." Imre examined Jenna's expression and concluded that she was telling the truth.
She genuinely had no knowledge of the terrifying aura.
The two Purifiers briefly recounted the sudden appearance of a terrifying and violent aura on Rue des Blouses Blanches the previous night, urging Jenna to be more vigilant towards anyone displaying unusual behavior lately.
Jenna agreed and asked with curiosity, "Was that aura very noticeable? Why were you able to sense it even from the cathedral?"
"It's hard to describe," Imre admitted. "If you ever have the chance to experience it, you'll understand." He himself couldn't fully grasp the extent of the influence of the terrifying aura.
After bidding farewell to the two Purifiers and returning to Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, Jenna's thoughts turned to Franca, who had acted strangely last night.
She had cryptically mentioned danger and advised Jenna to go home for a while. Eventually, she had come to share her bed late at night, explaining that something had occurred on Rue des Blouses Blanches and that she couldn't return...
That terrifying aura had appeared on Rue des Blouses Blanches... Jenna nodded, piecing things together.
Meanwhile, Franca finished her coffee and returned to her apartment on Rue des Blouses Blanches, which had returned to its usual state.
However, upon opening the door to Apartment 601, she noticed that the invisible "spider silk" she had concealed in the crack had fallen. This could only mean one thing—someone had entered!
In the next instant, she spotted someone sitting in her recliner.
It was Gardner Martin, a man with distinct facial features, brownish-red eyes, and a genial demeanor. A few gray strands of hair adorned his temples.
Startled, Franca exclaimed, "Why are you here?"
She was relieved that she hadn't returned with Lumian.
Gardner Martin asked, bemused, "What's your take on the aura from last night?"
"What aura?" Franca was perplexed.

Gardner Martin, dressed in a formal suit without a bow tie, examined Franca closely and explained, "A terrifying aura reeking of blood and rust."
"When did this happen?" Franca recalled and shook her head. "I was at Jenna's house last night. I wasn't in the market district."
Gardner Martin nodded slowly and smiled.
"No wonder you didn't sense it."
Apart from Ciel, Madame Hela, and me dealing with Loki, did anything else happen last night? Franca walked to the coffee table in confusion, picked up her cup, and took a sip of water.
"What happened?"
Gardner Martin stood up and approached the window, looking down at Rue des Blouses Blanches.
"Late last night, a violent and terrifying aura emerged from Building 6 on this street. It lasted nearly ten seconds."
Building 6... Building 6? Franca nearly choked on her own saliva.
Isn't that the safe house I had rented through a Loen merchant who had already left Trier?
Isn't that where I fought Loki last night?
Could Madame Hela or Loki have caused the commotion?
Or was it Ciel?
Franca quickly regained her composure before Gardner Martin turned around.
She felt as though she had missed many crucial details due to her fainting.
...
Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré.
Lumian, who had just returned from his morning exercises, had just changed into fresh clothes and was making his way to the first-floor hall when he encountered Anthony Reid, who had been deeply engrossed in his investigation regarding General Philip's widow and child.
The Psychiatrist glanced at Lumian and inquired, "What happened in the market district last night? I've had numerous individuals attempting to buy information related to it from me."
Lumian chuckled.
"Perhaps a strange aura erupted from Rue des Blouses Blanches."

Chapter 395: Progress on the Other Side

Anthony Reid, the middle-aged psychiatrist, observed Lumian's smile and mused, "Your performance suggests that this matter is personal to you."

Dammit, you can tell from that? Lumian had thought his smile, expression, and body language appeared normal. His response hadn't been exceptional, but he hadn't made any obvious mistakes.

Anthony Reid continued, "Your smile and actions betrayed a sense of smugness.

"And your reaction tells me this matter is deeply intertwined with you."

Could it be discerned even without mind reading? It wasn't until that moment that Lumian realized his seemingly ordinary expressions and actions might conceal hidden information in the eyes of a Psychiatrist.

Anthony Reid calmly advised, "I'm telling you directly how I've interpreted your cues. In the future, when you find yourself facing a Psychiatrist and wish to deceive them, it's best to prepare your emotions in advance and mentally rehearse your narrative as if it were genuine.

"If you'd rather not discuss the strange aura on Rue des Blouses Blanches, that's perfectly fine. I don't have the energy to gather information and trade it for money."

Lumian contemplated Anthony's words and nodded gently. He then inquired, "How's your investigation into General Philip going? Do you require our assistance?"

Anthony Reid glanced around, confirming there were no passersby in the hall at this late hour, and Madame Fels was at a considerable distance. He whispered, "General Philip's widow, child, and his closest friends during his lifetime don't seem to be a concern. They are leading normal lives.

"However, I've discovered that General Philip's widow donates a substantial sum to a charitable organization called Dreamseekers every quarter. The total donation amounts to nearly half of their apparent family assets."

Lumian pondered for a moment and asked, "Quite generous. What can you tell me about the Dreamseekers charity?"

Anthony Reid replied, "That's the subject of my next investigation. At present, I only know that their mission is to assist talented young individuals who have come to Trier to pursue their dreams but have encountered temporary hardships. They are not affiliated with the two Churches or established by government entities. It's a private charity primarily funded by donations from high society."

Lumian smiled and issued a warning with a hint of mockery, "Be cautious when delving into the Dreamseekers. Of course, if you happen to be reckless, it won't matter. At the very least, I'm already aware that if you were to suddenly vanish or meet an untimely demise, the source of the trouble likely stems from that charitable organization."

Anthony Reid stroked his light-yellow hair.

"Don't worry, I'm timid and value my life. I duck for cover at the sound of gunfire. If I ever sense danger, I won't be too proud to seek your assistance. Besides, this is what you promised me."

Without waiting for a reply, he continued, "Guillaume Bénet's wife has been residing at 20 Rue des Terraces in the library district and hasn't attempted to relocate.

"I've bribed some ordinary folks around her. Recently, they've informed me that a mysterious man occasionally visits her late at night, raising suspicions of an affair."

Condiment Beauty Paulina... Her decision to stay put on Rue des Terraces likely means she feels more secure now. Combined with the neighborhood rumors, there's a strong likelihood that she has reestablished contact with Bouvard Pont-Péro of the Sinners organization... Lumian smiled once more.

"Instruct your informants to compile a summary of the mysterious man's visitation patterns. This way, we can catch them in the act more precisely."

It was imperative to apprehend the Sinners' liaison, Bouvard Pont-Péro!

Only then could Lumian hope to trace the Sinners organization and locate Roche Louise Sanson's family.

Initially, he had hoped to start his investigation with the Sanson family name, possibly targeting Jacques Sanson, who had once run for parliament in the market district. However, he soon realized that Sanson was a common surname in Intis, and Jacques Sanson's family connections appeared straightforward. There were no apparent issues on the surface, and there were no reports of disappearances involving his sister, daughter, or other relatives.

After much contemplation, Lumian concluded that, for the time being, his focus needed to shift to the Sinners, an organization dedicated to the belief in Inevitability. His goal was to locate someone connected to the original Aurore's body.

He couldn't shake the feeling that there were still mysteries surrounding Loki and the others who had targeted Aurore. It was impossible that the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings had directly sent a revelation instructing Loki and the others to guide Muggle into using the Soul Summoning Spell on

herself, right?
Such a direct involvement didn't align with the typical status of a deity, and considering the Celestial Worthy's ongoing conflict with Mr. Fool, his condition shouldn't be that favorable.
Moreover, Aurore had never participated in the April Fool's team's real-life gatherings. How then could Loki determine that her original body was a follower of an evil god?
Lumian contemplated two possibilities. Either Aurore had long been tormented by Roche Louise Sanson's lingering will and sought help from I Know Someone, inadvertently revealing her secret and drawing their attention, or one of the core members of the April Fool's team had a close connection to the Sinners organization and stumbled upon the matters related to Roche Louise Sanson.
Anthony Reid nodded in approval as he observed Lumian's patience in waiting for the mysterious man who had visited Guillaume Bénet's wife to provide more clues.
...
Avenue du Marché, Salle de Bal Brise.
Just as Lumian reached the staircase, he spotted Sarkota waiting there.
"The Boss is upstairs," Sarkota whispered.
He had been a part of Baron Brignais' operation for a long time, but he had no inkling about the true identity of the elusive Boss of the Savoie Mob. By the time Ciel had taken over Salle de Bal Brise, the Boss had made two visits!
What's the Boss doing here? Lumian's mind raced as he quickly recalled the events of the past two days. A rough idea began to form.
Ascending the staircase to the second floor, he spotted Gardner Martin, impeccably dressed in formal attire, sans bow tie, leisurely savoring his coffee.
Gardner Martin put down his cup and asked with a smile, "Where did you go?"
Lumian responded with candor.
"I had a chat with Anthony Reid, the information broker. I assigned him a mission: keeping tabs on the widow of Guillaume Bénet, the enemy I just dispatched, and observing her associates.
"I suspect that Guillaume Bénet might be backed by a secret organization that worships an evil deity."
Gardner Martin chuckled and remarked, "You're not leaving any room for mercy, are you? You're even more ruthless than I thought. Yes, we can enlist the authorities' assistance to deal with these secret organizations of evil gods."
Without allowing Lumian a chance to reply, he inquired further,

"Did you sense that menacing and terrifying presence last night?"
Lumian nodded honestly.
"I felt it."
I was present at the scene...
Recalling the sensation coursing through his veins when he resonated with the Blood Emperor's aura, he added,
"Back then, my blood seemed to be on fire.
"I wanted to investigate the origin of that aura, but the official Beyonders were quicker and sealed off Rue des Blouses Blanches."
Gardner Martin appreciated Lumian's forthrightness.
"When the official Beyonders are less vigilant, pay a visit to 6 Rue des Blouses Blanches and do some digging. You might stumble upon something."
"Alright," Lumian agreed readily.
A return to the crime scene promised its own brand of intrigue.
...
Late at night, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Apartment 601, Franca's room.
Sitting beside the typewriter and radio transceiver, the Demoness of Pleasure perused the information before turning to Jenna, who sat by her bedside.
"The gist of the matter is that Ciel has stumbled upon a new enemy. This guy is a Sequence 5 Marionettist of the Seer pathway, a member of Bureau 8. He's sinister and powerful. Not only did he detect our surveillance, but he also traced us back and launched an ambush..."
Franca skipped over the part about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and recounted the entire incident.
In this narrative, Hela's identity had been that of a formidable Beyonder hired through a mysticism gathering.
Franca spread her hands and said, "I was out cold and unaware of the terrifying and violent aura that permeated the scene. When I came to, we were all underground. The Marionettist, who went by the code name Loki, was already dead. Ciel was incinerating his body, and that woman was watching."
Jenna was astounded by the capabilities and performance of a Marionettist. She tensed, feeling the summer night grow colder.
Seeing Jenna's reaction, Franca seized the moment to add, "But there's something even more chilling!"
She proceeded to recount everything she knew, sending shivers down Jenna's spine. Jenna involuntarily took a few steps closer to Franca.
"Dammit, what else have you guys been up to that I don't know about?" Jenna mustered her courage, spewing out a few choice

expletives.
"It's not us, it's Ciel!" Franca was about to delve into the horror when a message crackled through the radio transceiver.
The intricate analyzer automatically translated it, spitting out a piece of paper through a connected mechanical typewriter.
Franca picked it up and saw it was from 007.
"Hidden Blade, do you have any information about the terrifying aura in the market district last night?"
Franca typed out her response,
"I don't reside in the market district. Why would I know anything about it?"
007 quickly replied, "Most of the information you provide and the favors you ask from me are related to or within the vicinity of the market district. If you haven't set foot there in the past six months, I'll eat my own hat!"
Franca chuckled dryly and responded, under Jenna's watchful gaze. "I do have some knowledge about this incident.
"But I can't spill the beans right now. You'll get the scoop at our next gathering."
...
As Franca conversed with 007, Lumian was resting in Room 207 of the Auberge du Coq Doré.
For the moment, he refrained from finding any acting possibilities. Despite having received treatment from Madame Hela and no longer teetering on the brink of losing control, as well as the auto-recovery at 6 a.m., there were lingering mental issues that required time and rest to slowly mend. Additionally, he needed to wait for Madame Hela to extract "confessions" from the April Fool's team members.
Just before midnight, the pure silver skull emerged from the shadows, its teeth gripping a thick stack of papers.

Chapter 396: Pure Evil

Lumian expressed his gratitude and took the stack of papers. He lit the carbide lamp and quickly skimmed through the "confessions."

Hela had already thoroughly read through them and had made notes on the essential information. This saved Lumian a lot of time. Besides, he didn't know much about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's history. If he were the one making the choice, he might struggle to grasp the key points accurately.

After nearly an hour of reading, Lumian had a rough understanding of the overall situation.

"There aren't many April Fool's members, and they don't meet often or play pranks frequently. They mainly operate in three areas: Trier, the coastal province of Gaia in the Feynapotter Kingdom, and the West Balam region of the Southern Continent.

"The core members involved in the gatherings in Trier are Loki, I Know Someone, and Mad Lady.

"In the Gaia Province, during the sea prayer rituals at Port Santa, the April Fool's team members who pulled pranks were Bard, Ultraman, and Mad Lady. Bard and Ultraman incited local college students to march in Torres, the capital of Gaia Province...

"In the pranks that took place in the Southern Continent's West Balam, the core members involved were Hisoka and Mad Lady.

"At a private gathering in Trier, Loki jokingly mentioned that he had inherited an ancient castle.

"At another Trier gathering, I Know Someone suddenly felt inspired and wanted to hypnotize certain psychiatrists to make them 'conceive' a solution to treat certain mental illnesses by destroying the frontal lobe..."

Madam Susie's accusation of malicious treatment that would forever "calm" patients turns out to be a prank by I Know Someone... That's true. Only someone from another world could skip previous speculations and come up with such an idea...

His sole purpose was to see if the psychiatrists of this world were as foolish, bigoted, and despicable as to create an absurd tragedy that would leave a mark on medical history... The dozens or hundreds of patients who had completely lost their "souls" would never expect their tragic encounter to stem from an inhumane prank...

Loki and I Know Someone are worse than I imagined... Lumian couldn't help but shake his head as he read the last page of the "confessions."

He believed that he had already witnessed the worst side of humanity during his tramp days. People had committed heinous

acts for food, to escape trouble, to vent their emotions—they had murdered other tramps, sold companions to the mines while they were asleep, abducted children from the streets, bullied the weak, and humiliated them in various ways. Some had formed gangs and chased away other tramps every day, turning a blind eye to their suffering.

But now, Lumian realized that these evils were clearly inferior to those of Loki, I Know Someone, and the other core members of April Fool's. They were on a whole other level.

"Even demons from the Abyss would have to address them as godfathers when they see them. Compared to them, the padre can be considered a saint," Lumian muttered, setting fire to these people repeatedly in his mind.

He exhaled and extracted useful information from these "confessions" and Madame Hela's markings.

At least eight members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society are suspected to have perished as a direct or indirect result of pranks by the April Fool's team...

I Know Someone, like Loki, participates in every private gathering in Trier, but he has never been to Feynapotter's Gaia Province or West Balam. This suggests he likely resides in Trier as well...

Similarly, Bard and Ultraman are suspected to be in Feynapotter's Gaia Province. Hisoka is located in the Southern Continent's West Balam...

Mad Lady participates in private gatherings everywhere, and these gatherings occur within a month after an agreement is made. This implies that Mad Lady has a teleportation-like ability or item...

The joke about Loki inheriting the ancient castle aligns with his dream. Perhaps I can start with investigating the appearance of the ancient castle to find Loki's whereabouts...

I Know Someone displayed extensive medical knowledge at gatherings, not limited to the psychological domain... He was either a formidable general practitioner before transmigrating or possessed the body of a senior doctor. *Could such a person be usually a doctor in disguise?* He has the qualifications and ability to impersonate and earn a large sum of money...

Bard loves to collect Emperor Roselle's diary pages and mock him in various ways. Could he have written Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles?

Ultraman and Hisoka keep a relatively low profile during the gatherings, leaving no details worth pondering...

Based on this information, Lumian finalized his next course of investigation.

Firstly, he wanted to find the ancient castle from Loki's dream.

Secondly, he aimed to delve into the medical profession, seeking clues about I Know Someone. Thirdly, he planned to wait for the next gathering to confirm whether the author of Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles was among the current Research Society members before pursuing the original author.
As for the others, he would consider them after dealing with these matters and gaining something more valuable.
Lumian summoned the Rabbit of Knowledge and had it copy the information before sending it to Madam Magician.
...
"What's this?" Jenna looked at the pure silver skull emerging from the darkness, a little afraid to meet the pale-white flames in its eye sockets.
Franca smiled awkwardly and said, "This is the messenger of that formidable lady. She helped us organize the accomplices' statements."
Franca snatched the thick piece of paper from the skull's mouth, not wanting Jenna to see the firsthand information.
Revealing it would expose the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society!
Jenna looked at the pure silver skull disappearing into the darkness and asked in confusion and curiosity, "What's a messenger?"
"It's like a postman in the world of mysticism. It's a postman for private use," Franca explained simply.
Jenna shifted her gaze to Franca.
"Do you have one?"
Franca fell silent.
"This can only be obtained by a specific pathway at a specific Sequence or with their help."
"Oh, you don't..." Jenna deciphered Franca's words.
Intrigued, she asked, "At which Sequence in the Demoness pathway does one need to reach before they can have a messenger?"
Franca fell silent again.
"Not even at Sequence 4 that I know of."
With that, she muttered under her breath, "You can switch to the Hunter pathway with your provocative abilities."
Jenna chuckled and thought for a moment.
"The last time I helped Ciel read about spirit world creatures, I seemed to have noticed a description of a few spirit world creatures that said they were 'suitable as messengers.' Can we summon them and sign a messenger contract?"
"No, uh, it's not impossible." Franca suddenly realized that she

could use Mr. Fool's power to summon creatures from the spirit world and ask Him to be a witness to the contract, just like Ciel's contract ability.
Seeing Franca deep in thought, Jenna waited silently.
After a moment, Franca nodded slowly.
"I've come up with an idea. We'll try it later."
She then said to Jenna, "I'll sort out these statements. Don't stay up too late. You still have to go to Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons tomorrow morning."
Jenna didn't inquire further and left Franca's bedroom.
Franca let out a sigh of relief and took a telegram that had just been received.
It also came from 007.
"Hidden Blade, when are you moving out of the market district?
"Ever since you arrived here, all kinds of troubles have been happening one after another. I'm about to become a real 007. I suspect you're the walking source of disaster!"
"Pfft!" Franca spat and muttered to herself, "Is the problem me? It's Ciel!"
Ever since Lumian arrived in the market district, her life hadn't been as leisurely as before.
The incident with Loki had just subsided, and the small cracks on her skin had yet to fully heal. She had to go to Trocadéro tomorrow afternoon to interact with the participants of the Red House Café's female orgy and the woman suspected to be a member of the Demoness Sect.
...
Around 9 a.m., Lumian, having completed his morning exercise and breakfast, found himself with a rare moment of leisure.
On the Iron and Blood Cross Order's side, he awaited Poufer Sauron's next summoning. Concerning the Sinners organization, he patiently gathered information without alerting the occasional mysterious visitor. Anthony Reid would handle matters related to Hugues Artois, but his assistance wasn't needed yet. It proved challenging to discreetly tail Franca during the Bliss Society investigations as she needed to make contact with the Demoness Sect. Lumian had leads on Loki's ancient castle and I Know Someone, but lacked a clear breakthrough.
After careful consideration, Lumian decided that acting as a Pyromaniac was the best course of action. However, the market district was in a delicate state, closely monitored by numerous high-ranking individuals. Finding a safe opportunity was crucial.
Should I take the opportunity to report to Mr. K and inquire if he has a suitable mission for me to act as a Pyromaniac... Lost in

thought, he walked past the Salle de Gristmill on Rue Anarchie's other side.
The establishment was under Lumian's ownership, currently overseen by the bounty hunter Lugano Toscano and Louis of the Savoie Mob.
After a brief moment of reflection, Lumian decided to enter the Salle de Gristmill.
The dance hall was closed at that time, and every waiter greeted Lumian respectfully but kept their distance.
Lumian quickly spotted Lugano Toscano, the well-built bounty hunter with sharp features, thick eyebrows, and large eyes. He was dressed in a simple formal suit and a black top hat.
Holding a magazine, he smiled at Lumian. "Boss, what brings you here?"
Lumian didn't respond immediately. His attention was drawn to the magazine in Lugano's hand. "What magazine are you reading?"
"Basics of Medicine," Lugano replied, displaying the book.
Basics of Medicine... Lumian's eyebrows twitched. "Why are you reading such books?"
He could understand if it was the First Aid Manual.
Lugano smiled and explained, "My next Sequence is Doctor. Although the potion will directly grant me corresponding Beyonder powers, having more medical knowledge will enhance my abilities. Plus, I aim to pose as a genuine doctor to earn some extra income."
Stumbling on the acting method coincidentally... Doctor... Lumian's heart stirred as he asked, "Have you ever heard of frontal lobe removal surgery?"

Chapter 397: Execution Ground

Lugano cast a puzzled glance at Lumian.
"You've heard about this surgery too?"
After a moment of thought, he forced a smile.
"As expected of you. You're knowledgeable and have a wide range of interests. You even know about such cutting-edge surgeries."
"Seems like you know a lot," Lumian brushed off Lugano's ingratiation.
Lugano nodded quickly.
"I've read in several magazines that doctors believe the essence of such surgery is to destroy the patient's brain, and it's irreversible. In other words, while it appears to cure the patient's madness, it leaves him with lower intelligence and eternally calm, devoid of emotional fluctuations.
"They believe that if we don't use this surgery, there's still a chance of recovery from the madness through other methods, but once they become stupid, there's no hope of recovery."
Intis still has many doctors with high academic standards who dare to speak the truth. Their professional ethics aren't bad either... Lumian nodded inwardly.
After confirming that Lugano had a certain understanding of the medical world, he casually asked,
"Any strange medical cases recently?"
Lugano pondered for a moment and slowly shook his head.
"Nothing out of the ordinary."
Just as Lumian was about to change the subject, Lugano added, "If you insist on something strange, there's a folklore that's been trending on a small scale recently."
"Medical-related folklore?" Lumian discerned the underlying meaning in Lugano's words.
Lugano, with his brown hair and eyes, replied with a smile, "Sort of.
"It's probably because a group of Trier citizens believe that the blood shed by a death row inmate carries the last vestiges of life's resilience. If you eat some bread dipped in it, it can treat various illnesses. This infuriated many medical columnists, who called it a retro, bloody, and foolish act. In comparison, going to the cathedral to seek protection might be more effective."
"Why haven't I heard of such folklore?" Lumian found the Trier citizens' actions indescribable. They weren't just foolish.
Lugano chuckled.
"Boss, that's normal. I've never heard of it before either. It's a folklore that only appeared in the past two to three months.

Perhaps it's brought about by some foreigners. More and more people are believing it."
Lumian chatted with the bounty hunter, who had saved up to purchase the Doctor main ingredient, for a while longer, gaining a vague understanding of Trier's medical world.
Shortly before noon, having filled his stomach, he turned onto Rue des Blouses Blanches and entered Apartment 3.
Throughout this process, Lumian didn't conceal his curiosity. He carefully examined 6 Rue des Blouses Blanches, but found no traces.
He knocked on Apartment 601's door and tossed the Lie earring to Franca, whose flaxen-colored hair was tied up in a simple ponytail.
This companion had to interact with the Demoness Sect in the afternoon again. She had to revert to her previous appearance.
"What took you so long?" Franca precisely caught the silver earring. "Didn't you receive the information from Madame Hela? I've been waiting for you to come and discuss it."
A soft chuckle escaped Lumian's lips.
"Why are you even more anxious than me?"
After closing the door, he sat on the sofa and recounted the key information and corresponding guesses he had extracted from the information. Franca chimed in from time to time, offering her opinions.
Towards the end, Lumian recounted the bounty hunter Lugano Toscano's description of Trier's medical world and the strange folklore.
Franca's expression turned odd.
"Is there a problem?" Lumian wasn't alarmed but delighted.
Franca confirmed succinctly, "The rumor that eating bread stained with the blood of death row inmates can treat illnesses is very similar to ancient folklore back home, but that was many years ago. Ever since education was made universal, such folklore has basically disappeared.
"In the original folklore, steamed buns dyed red by the blood of death row inmates could treat severe lung ailments, provided they were eaten while they were still hot."
Lumian raised his right eyebrow.
He had found the strange folklore giving him an indescribable feeling.
It felt like a prank!
This was the style of April Fool's!
"I Know Someone came up with it?" Lumian suddenly felt a surge of excitement.

A Psychiatrist capable of hypnosis could make such folklore appear and spread without anyone knowing!
Franca nodded solemnly.
"I Know Someone is also from your sister's and my homeland. Otherwise, your sister wouldn't have trusted him and sought treatment for her psychological problems.
"His code name and the language he knows bear witness to this. Besides him and Black Earth, the other members of April Fool's might not be aware of that ancient folklore."
"Loki doesn't know either?" Lumian asked in surprise.
"I'm not sure." Franca frowned. "I'm not familiar with him, and he has never revealed his identity as a fellow countryman. If he hadn't recited the four-lined honorific name in the language of your sister and me, I wouldn't have known that he knew it. I always thought that their team's Emperor Roselle diary entries were translated by I Know Someone and Black Earth."
A mischievous grin curved Lumian's lips.
"If it's really a folklore prank created by I Know Someone, I'll go to the execution ground in the prison district and watch."
The prison district, also known as Quartier du Red Hat, officially numbered 4, was one of the oldest urban districts. It boasted Intis's most renowned prison, Saint-Maar Prison, hence the district's name.
Near Saint-Maar Prison stood one of Trier's busiest execution grounds—Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground.
"Be careful. Psychiatrists are more cautious than Marionettists," Franca warned.
Although I Know Someone wasn't a Beyonder of the Seer, Marauder, or Apprentice pathways and couldn't discover the seal on Lumian's body even if he believed in the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings, Lumian still felt that he couldn't be careless. He got back the Lie earring and briefly changed his appearance. He was worried that the resurrected Loki had already communicated with I Know Someone about his and Franca's real appearance.
Franca took back the Lie earring and asked curiously, "What was up with that terrifying aura from that day?"
Lumian chuckled.
"We'll need to start with Madame Hela and me searching for the Samaritan Women's Spring."
"..." Franca was taken aback for a moment before cursing. "Dammit! How many details did you leave out?"
"It depends on when it comes up." Lumian briefly mentioned how the Blood Emperor's aura had corroded his flesh.

Franca had already forgotten her anger. She carefully observed Lumian's raised right palm and finally noticed the indistinct marks that seemed to have been squeezed beyond recognition.
"Wow, you actually have the aura of a true god on you. Although it's just an empty shell, it's still the aura of a true god. Furthermore, it's a true god of the same pathway." Franca sighed enviously, wishing she could have one for herself.
She then looked at Lumian's bandaged left hand.
"What's on this one?"
"Nothing. It's just to attract attention," Lumian replied with a smile.
Franca was stunned for two seconds.
"You're so sinister! If you advance to a Conspirer, your digestion speed will definitely be very fast!"
"I hope the outcome is as good as your blessings," Lumian replied without modesty.
...
In the afternoon, Lumian took a public carriage to the north bank of the Srenzo River and arrived at the Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground in the prison district.
One of Trier's citizens' hobbies was watching the execution of criminals. Although it wasn't the weekend, there were still many people gathered here. There were even many vendors setting up stalls or traversing among them, hawking food and drinks.
Among them, there was no shortage of gorgeously dressed street girls seeking business, as well as a group of authors who had deliberately come to take a stroll.
If not for the name "Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground" written at the intersection and the gallows and beheading platform standing in the distance, Lumian would have suspected that he had come to the wrong place and entered a nearby market. It was bustling and noisy.
Stepping on the muddy ground, Lumian concealed himself in the crowd and circled the execution ground as if he were strolling through a market.
He didn't spot anyone suspicious, but he saw a dozen or so men and women with bread in their hands crowding in front. Their clothes were old, and some of them could be considered crude.
After a while, the crowd suddenly stirred, squeezing to the sides of the road leading to the execution ground to welcome the procession from Saint-Maar Prison.
Lumian didn't join in the bustle, but he heard cheers, whistles, and women shouting, "I'm willing to marry you."
The latter wasn't a proposal, but a jest about past folklore. In the

classical era before Emperor Roselle, if a death row inmate received a proposal while walking from prison to the execution ground and he agreed, he would receive a change in sentence and survive. However, not all death row inmates would accept it. Some valued looks very much, while others had dignity. They all chose death to uphold their ideals.

The two most renowned cases involved a handsome death row inmate who rejected the proposal of a woman, believing her appearance to be a nightmare. On the other hand, a beautiful girl, faced with an executioner's courtship, gave up the opportunity to save herself, believing it was an insult to love and marriage.

Lumian squeezed into the front row of onlookers and saw two death row inmates standing at the firing point.

They were relatively young, no more than 30 years old. They wore standard prison uniforms—red short shirts, yellow pants, and green hats. Their feet dragged iron balls, and their hands were tied behind their backs with iron chains.

One of the men had black hair and blue eyes, while the other had brown hair and brown eyes. They were good-looking, but their gazes were filled with hatred.

Upon seeing the execution gunmen reach their designated positions and raise their rifles, the two death row inmates shouted, "Long live freedom!"

"Return to glory!"

After shouting, the two of them glared at each other angrily and collapsed amidst the gunshots, blood gushing out.

The people holding the bread were excited, but they were stopped by the soldiers in front of them and couldn't rush to the firing point.

Once the condition of the two death row inmates was confirmed, the soldiers left in formation. The bread-wielding citizens charged towards the blood-stained soil.

Lumian didn't look at them. Instead, he observed his surroundings to see who was enjoying this absurd comedy.

Chapter 398: Human Blood Bread

Some of the citizens of Trier were curious and began asking around for the reason behind the commotion, while others watched with excitement. Lumian couldn't discern who was genuinely enjoying the prank's results and who was simply caught up in the fun.

This was a part of Trier's folklore. Lumian believed that even a formidable, higher-Sequence psychiatrist like Madam Susie wouldn't be able to pinpoint the source of the commotion, identify the prankster, or distinguish the intentional misguidance from the innocent bystanders.

Although Lumian had anticipated this, he couldn't help but let out a sigh.

"You Trierians..."

No wonder the April Fool's team held their private gatherings here. It was like a homecoming.

Lumian abandoned his observations and casually singled out a middle-aged man who was using rye bread to soak up the blood left behind by the death row inmates. He waited until the man made a dash for an exit of the Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground before quietly following behind.

In a secluded alley devoid of barricades, Lumian took a few steps forward, blocking the path of the middle-aged man in a tattered linen shirt.

Raising his bandaged left palm, Lumian inquired, as if he were a mobster giving a condescending glance to an ordinary citizen.

"What have you got there?"

The gaunt middle-aged man with short black hair replied timidly, "It's bread stained with the blood of death row inmates."

"And what's the purpose of this?" Lumian adopted the tone of a curious monster with a touch of intrigue.

The middle-aged man's fear was palpable.

"I-It can treat illnesses."

"Who told you it could treat illnesses?" This was Lumian's main question.

The middle-aged man answered in a daze, "I heard it from Guillaume, who lives across the street. He said that his coworker's child got better after eating this kind of human blood bread."

The child of a coworker's neighbor... Lumian regarded it as nothing more than a rumor. Tracing its origin would be challenging.

He studied the middle-aged man clutching the blood-stained bread and asked with contemplation, "Is someone in your family sick too?"

"Yes." The middle-aged man instantly looked downtrodden and filled with despair.
He glanced at the blood-stained bread in his hand, a glimmer of hope in his eyes.
Lumian remained silent for a moment before responding, "What did the doctor say?"
The middle-aged man lowered his head slightly, his gaze fixed on the blood bread.
"He said there's no cure, and I don't have the money to..."
Lumian didn't press further. He turned silently, allowing the middle-aged man to pass through the barricade with his blood-soaked bread and continue down the secluded alley.
He moved slowly, retracing his steps back to the Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground, and noticed that the "market" was still in full swing. Many citizens had taken advantage of the situation to have picnics, sing, and dance, turning it into an impromptu gathering.
Lumian took cover behind the trees on the edge of the square, sitting in the shadows, and continued to silently observe the people coming and going.
As time passed, the bustling "market" in the execution ground gradually quieted down. The sun had dipped below the horizon, casting the surroundings into darkness.
Lumian remained hidden, keeping an eye on the departing citizens and vendors. However, he didn't identify any suspicious individuals.
With the arrival of the dark night, the Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground was deserted, bathed in the eerie light of the crimson moon. Lumian slowly rose to his feet, preparing to depart.
Suddenly, he caught sight of a dark figure leaping over the side fence and swiftly infiltrating the execution ground.
Lumian froze and pressed further into the shadows of the tree.
The slender figure, adorned with a top hat, made his way to the area where the death row inmates had met their end. He knelt down, reached out, and collected the soil stained with their blood.
Could this person also believe in the healing properties of death row inmates' blood? His actions and agility suggest he might be a Beyonder... Lumian silently watched the mysterious figure.
Before long, the tall, thin figure in the top hat straightened up, holding a mound of blood-soaked soil.
Rather than immediately leaving the Rois execution grounds, he ventured deeper, heading towards the gallows.
Under the crimson moonlight, the figure buried the blood-stained soil beneath the gallows. He seemed to scrutinize the plants

growing there, as if searching for something.
...
In Trocadéro Town, inside the Red House Café with its vibrant mushroom-like roof,
Franca, sporting black hair, brown eyes, and hunting attire, placed her dinner order: beef seasoned with coarse salt, red wine, fries, Feysac omelet, quail bisque with a few slices of ham.
Earlier that afternoon, she had engaged in a lively conversation with a group of ladies and could sense the longing and desire in their eyes.
Simultaneously, she felt someone secretly observing her, prompting her to stay until nightfall.
As Franca neared the end of her dinner, a woman descended from the second floor.
It was the Demoness who had tailed Franca previously. Today, her long orange-red hair cascaded down her back, and she wore a white man's shirt, brown dungarees, and dark brown boots that accentuated her perfect figure. Her appearance was exquisite and clean, with an aura that was both pure and slightly wild.
Without hesitation, the woman, presumably a member of the Demoness Sect, walked straight toward Franca, pulled out a chair, and sat opposite her.
Franca deliberately assessed the Demoness's appearance and figure with a masculine gaze. She smiled and watched as the woman sat down, waiting for her to speak.
"Why are you here again?" the orange-red-haired Demoness inquired, studying Franca closely.
Franca smiled and replied, "Trocadéro Wine is my favorite wine. The scenery and atmosphere here are quite appealing."
Noticing the Demoness's disbelief, Franca added with a sly smile, "Besides, I've heard..."
She lowered her voice and insinuated, "There are female orgies here."
The eyes of the Demoness with long orange-red hair flickered.
"Who told you that?"
Franca looked at the Demoness's face and said provocatively, "Once, I encountered a nymphomaniac who tried to ambush me, but I handled him. He claimed to be a peripheral member of an organization called the Bliss Society. The core members of this organization are lesbians, and they are trying to connect with participants in the female orgies at the Red House Café, looking to recruit new members."
Franca wasn't sure if the Demoness Sect had any ties to the Bliss Society. After all, it wasn't inconceivable for organizations

worshiping evil gods to form alliances to some extent, similar to how Hugues Artois had numerous heretics under his influence. Therefore, she "confessed" this information to gauge the reaction of the person sitting across from her.
As she spoke, she prepared herself for any potential surprise attacks.
The Demoness with long orange-red hair's expression shifted slightly, becoming more serious.
The hostility and wariness in her eyes diminished, but there was a clear sense of repulsion.
Oh, does she view the participants of these female gatherings as her lovers and is unwilling to let me, possibly once a man, near them? Franca couldn't help but mimic Lumian's tone inwardly and playfully tease.
She was reasonably certain that the other party had never heard of the Bliss Society, but she had detected some signs.
The Demoness sitting across from Franca fell into deep thought, appearing to consider a potential issue.
After more than ten seconds, she unconsciously brushed back her long orange-red hair and asked cautiously, "Are you here to investigate the Bliss Society, or are you interested in joining the orgy?"
Franca's laugh drew astonished looks from the surrounding customers, who were clearly taken aback by her stunning expression.
"Both," Franca replied, meeting the orange-red eyes of the Demoness. "But if I had to choose, I'd prefer attending the orgy. How can people like us resist such a tempting party? Wouldn't you agree?"
In this way, Franca subtly indicated that she had deduced that the other person was also a Demoness and likely a former male Assassin.
She also hinted at her own history as a man to deter any sudden attacks.
The Demoness, now dressed as a man, seemed to resist this notion but remained silent, clearly captivated by Franca's presence and aura.
Leaning forward, Franca asked in a more masculine tone, "What should I call you?"
The Demoness hesitated briefly before responding somberly, "I'm Browns Sauron. And you?"
Sauron... Another member of the Sauron family? Franca suddenly recalled that Lumian's recent mission under the Iron and Blood Cross Order involved interactions with members of the Sauron

family.
She didn't conceal her true name and smiled. "Franca Roland."
Browns Sauron let out a silent sigh and continued, "Our party places great importance on the privacy and safety of all members. We can't allow problematic individuals to join. If you're truly interested, you'll need to undergo an audit."
Franca didn't mind at all. She toyed with the buttons on her shirt and inquired with a grin,
"So, where should we start this audit?"
...
Prison district, Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground.
Under the crimson moonlight, the tall, slender figure in the top hat carefully unearthed a few handfuls of weeds from the ground beneath the gallows.
The roots of these weeds emitted an eerie, blood-red glow, appearing especially otherworldly in the moon's dim light.
This tall, thin figure had a prominent nose bridge, fair skin, and impeccably groomed medium-length black hair. His eyes were a striking shade of red, and he possessed a certain androgynous allure.
Clad in a white shirt, a vibrant red bow tie, and a sleek black suit, he gazed with fascination at the peculiar weeds in his hand. He was on the verge of rising to leave the execution grounds.
However, at that very moment, a curious male voice broke the silence.
"What are you digging?"
The lanky figure, who had been crouched beneath the gallows, looked up in astonishment. To his surprise, he realized that, at some unnoticeable point in time, a figure had materialized before him, peering down with a penetrating gaze.
This new arrival had blond hair and eyes as blue as serene lakes. He wore a simple white shirt and a black vest, giving him a youthful and refreshing appearance.
How did he manage to approach me without detection? I didn't pick up on any scent or movement! The lanky figure's heart raced with alarm and trepidation.

Chapter 399: Mandrake

The lanky figure, though startled, sprang into action.
In a swift motion, he launched a powerful kick with his knee, lunging at Lumian, leaving only a blur behind.
Rather than reaching out with his right hand, which was gripping the strange weeds, he extended his nails, etched with mystical symbols and patterns, appearing hard and razor-sharp.
Darkness surrounding Lumian seemed to awaken, converging into pitch-black chains that aimed to ensnare him in place.
Lumian's gaze remained resolute as he observed the rapidly approaching figure. He emitted a soft harrumph.
Two beams of brilliant white light shot forth from his nostrils, striking the target before he could evade in time.
The tall, slender figure suddenly crumpled to the ground, unconscious.
The illusory chains, formed from darkness, disintegrated into nothingness.
Lumian, donning a different visage, grinned and shook his head. "You actually opted for an attack rather than fleeing."
Utilizing spirit world traversal, he teleported to close the distance with his target discreetly, preventing him from sensing the impending danger. When they were within mere meters of each other, escape or counterattack became impossible. At worst, both parties would sustain injuries. Hence, Lumian still had time for a "greeting." If the other party cooperated and answered civilly, there might be no need for a confrontation.
It was akin to a phrase frequently espoused by the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society:
Encouraging compliance through good morals!
Lumian carefully observed for a few moments and confirmed that the tall, thin figure had indeed fainted.
He bent down to examine the peculiar blood-red rooted weeds. Apart from their extraordinary spiritual properties, they seemed rather ordinary.
After some contemplation, Lumian hoisted the unconscious figure and shook him vigorously.
As the target began to stir, Lumian released his grip and stepped back.
Based on the previous skirmish, Lumian suspected that the other party was a Mid-Sequence Beyonder from the Apothecary pathway, specifically Sequence 7, known as Vampire. This meant that any human who consumed the corresponding potion to advance would eventually undergo a transformation into another species.

Aurore possessed substantial knowledge about Vampires' characteristics and abilities, as the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society included two individuals known as Sanguines, one of whom bore the code name "Headmaster."

Hence, Lumian deduced the target's identity based on his swift reflexes, formidable nails, and the dark shackles-like spells he wielded.

Since he wasn't a Psychiatrist and didn't possess any similar items, they weren't truly enemies. The best course of action was to engage in a friendly and cooperative conversation.

As soon as the lanky figure regained consciousness, he sprang to his feet and scanned his surroundings with a wary gaze. His eyes fell upon a blond youth standing by the gallows, dressed in a crisp outfit and wearing a friendly smile.

Instinctively, he considered launching an attack, but a rational thought held him back.

The other party had clearly demonstrated the ability to subdue him effortlessly, with the power to end his life or sell him at any moment. However, instead of harm, he had chosen to awaken him!

This implied an absence of immediate malice. Moreover, it indicated a profound confidence in his own capabilities, as if he were unafraid of any resistance or escape.

The lanky figure recalled the other party's sudden appearance and the peculiar white beams. He couldn't help but feel that even if the barons or even viscounts from his family were to confront him, the outcome wouldn't be so swift and one-sided.

Coupled with his ignorance of the two white beams' nature and the corresponding pathway, he suspected that the individual before him had surpassed his expectations in terms of Sequence.

"What do you want?" the lanky figure inquired in a deep voice.

Lumian remained composed, ready to employ the Spell of Harrumph if necessary.

"Are you a Vampire?"

"Sanguine," the lanky figure emphasized.

Lumian cast his eyes skyward at the crimson moon and inquired with a smile, "Which family?"

Though he possessed no knowledge of the numerous Vampire families or the renowned last names, it didn't prevent him from assuming the role of an ancient being, wise and well-traveled.

Sensing the fear in the lanky figure's demeanor, Lumian seized the opportunity to play this role, drawing inspiration from figures like the ancient monster Amon, who had lived for eons.

"I hail from the Bruch family," the tall, slender figure declared with

pride. "My name is La Nou Bruch."
What kind of family is this? I've never heard of them... Lumian nodded slightly and said, "Ah, the Bruch family."
He glanced at the strange weed in La Nou's hand. "What is this?"
"It's Mandrake," La Nou responded truthfully, believing that such a potent Beyonder wouldn't have much interest in a plant primarily used for spiritual purposes.
You mustn't merely answer my questions one by one. Be proactive and provide context and your reasons for being here. *How can I maintain my image like this?* Lumian chided him internally as he thought rapidly.
"Did you come specifically to retrieve it because this herb holds unique significance for you?"
La Nou hesitated for a moment before succumbing to his fear.
"Yes, the lotion made from it can help me withstand the spirituality surge during the full moon."
Spirituality surge... Lumian recalled some details from Aurore's grimoires: The Headmaster of the Academy team had sought a solution to the spirituality surge during the full moon within the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, but had found none.
According to Sanguine accounts, after the awakening of the Ancestor of the ancient species a few years ago and Her reclamation of authority from the Evernight Goddess, all Sanguines had become unstable during the full moon.
This wasn't the madness that afflicted the Mutants, but a form of sublimation. Nevertheless, the sudden surge in spirituality, akin to a rising tide, placed a substantial burden on the Vampires' bodies. Some experienced hallucinations or unnecessary danger due to their heightened spiritual perception during this period.
Lumian regarded La Nou with interest and asked, "Mandrake can suppress the spirituality surge during the full moon?"
"The few Sanguines I've encountered seem to be unaware of this."
The entire Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society was unaware!
La Nou didn't hide his smugness.
"I believe I may be the first to have made this discovery. Mandrake is a plant that thrives beneath the corpses of hanged individuals. It appears to draw power from some sort of earthbound divine influence."
Spiritual plants associated with the earth domain? Lumian inquired thoughtfully, "How did you stumble upon this revelation?"
Observing that such a formidable Beyonder was ignorant of the origins and applications of Mandrake, La Nou's smile broadened.
"At first, there were rumors circulating about the plants that grew beneath the bodies of the hanged being able to treat various

ailments. Given that every Sanguine is an Apothecary, I couldn't entirely dismiss these rumors. So, I decided to give it a shot. I crafted a Mandrake lotion and found that it remarkably suppressed spirituality fluctuations."
Rumor... Rumors once again... Lumian suppressed his frown.
"Do you happen to know where these rumors originated?"
"I'm afraid not," La Nou replied with a shake of his head. "In Trier, rumors abound. For example, in recent months, I was concerned that the reckless harvesting of Mandrake by uninformed citizens might disrupt its growth. However, new rumors have surfaced, with people now chasing after blood-soaked soil from death row inmates."
"It's indeed a challenge to trace the origins of rumors in Trier," Lumian remarked, a touch of resignation in his voice.
"Why did you bring soil stained with the blood of a death row inmate to the gallows?"
La Nou proudly displayed his findings.
"I've discovered that Mandrake flourishes beneath the bodies of hanged individuals. While it's most effective, hanging people isn't a common occurrence. However, by using the blood of other death row inmates to nourish it, Mandrake can still grow. Although it's not as potent, it gets the job done."
Lumian nodded thoughtfully, considering another aspect of the issue.
"Who initially gave the Mandrake its name? Wasn't it merely a rumor in the beginning?"
When it came to topics within his apparent "profession," La Nou spoke confidently.
"This plant has borne its name for quite some time, though no one had discovered its medicinal value until now. It was primarily utilized as a spiritual ingredient and as a component in certain spells..."
At this juncture, La Nou suddenly fell into a momentary stupor.
"Why haven't my ancestors, the illustrious Apothecaries, attempted to concoct lotions with Mandrake? They aren't confined to traditional knowledge; they explore ingredients based on principles and develop new lotions..."
"Perhaps they did try, but there was no spiritual surge in those times?"
Could it be that Mandrake possessed some mystical power triggered by the spirituality surge accompanying the full moon? Lumian, not being an Apothecary or a Mysticologist, couldn't arrive at a conclusive answer. All he could do was speculate based on La Nou's musings.

He changed the subject.
"Why did you refrain from reporting the Mandrake's utility to your elders? It could hold great significance for the entire Sanguine community."
La Nou stammered, "There are still some issues with the lotions I've crafted. I'm uncertain if the toxicity of Mandrake can be entirely neutralized. I plan to verify this before informing the higher-ups. Only then can I have a clear chance at ascending to the rank of baron."
"What issues have you encountered?" Lumian queried, part-curious and partly assisting the Headmaster of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.
La Nou adjusted his long, black hair and expressed his concerns with a mix of confusion and apprehension.
"Whenever I consume the various Mandrake-based lotions, it's akin to ingesting poisonous mushrooms. I witness an abundance of flowers blooming on the ground, with countless tiny figures dancing amidst them. I find myself covered in mushrooms.
"The illusions vary somewhat each time, but recurring elements persist."
Could it be that your preemptive entry into the illusion mitigates the adverse effects of your spirituality surge state? Is that why you believe Mandrake can suppress this phenomenon? Lumian silently pondered.
Without further ado, he activated his spirit world traversal ability and vanished from La Nou's view.
A Sequence 5 Traveler or an item of similar nature? La Nou heaved a sigh of relief, hazarding a rough guess as to why the other party could appear beside him before he could react.
Coupled with the strange white beams, such a figure was undoubtedly formidable below the demigod level.

Chapter 400: Transferring Burdens

The street lamps outside the window had already lit up. Franca gazed at Browns Sauron and spoke, "I've already mentioned my name. I reside in the market district and hold a significant position within the Savoie Mob. That's all I can reveal. You're free to investigate me as you wish. In any case, I have two objectives. Firstly, I intend to probe into the Bliss Society and eliminate any hidden threats. Secondly, I plan to take the opportunity to gain insight into the female gathering."

Franca couldn't help but smile at her last statement.

Her strategy for the day involved connecting with people genuinely—a tactic she had devised with Lumian. If the Demoness at the Red House Café approached her, she would "confess" her intentions and assess if the other party had any ties to the Bliss Society.

Franca had even discussed specific details with Anthony Reid, a Psychiatrist, to prevent herself from reacting excessively. If that happened, it could do more harm than good.

According to Anthony Reid's suggestion, she was "candid," but not completely forthcoming. Revealing that she was once a man, had transformed into a Demoness of Pleasure, and was infiltrating the Savoie Mob to join the Iron and Blood Cross Order and eventually return to her original gender would not only fail to gain trust but also raise suspicions of ulterior motives due to her excessive honesty.

Thus, she only disclosed her identity and primary motives on the surface, leaving the rest hidden in the details, allowing the other party to uncover and investigate on their own.

Information gathered through effort was much more credible than mere words!

Browns Sauron fixed his gaze on Franca's eyes and remarked, "With the strength you've demonstrated, why limit yourself to being a mob leader?"

"For something of great importance, I believe you would have done the same," Franca replied cryptically, hinting that she had also discerned the other party's path, approximate Sequence, and original circumstances.

With that, she raised her hand to touch the silver-white earring fastened to her right earlobe and added with a grin, "I forgot to mention that this isn't my true appearance. My disguise is quite effective. Otherwise, why did you lose track of me the last time?"

Browns glanced at the silver earring, nodding in comprehension.

Instead of delving deeper into Franca's identity, the conversation shifted toward the topic of the Bliss Society.

Franca could discern that the Demoness placed significant importance on the Red House Café's female orgies and was cautious about any organizations or individuals with hidden agendas.

Are you telling me that you genuinely form romantic connections with some of the participants in these orgies and have developed feelings for them? If this continues, you're bound to encounter trouble sooner or later. It's perfectly natural to have emotions, but seeking them in such gatherings is a sign of a narrow perspective... Can't you completely separate the spiritual from the physical? When there's too much spiritual connection, the desire for physical intimacy grows. Conversely, with too much physical intimacy, it's inevitable for souls to draw closer... As an observer, Franca offered her critique of Browns Sauron's situation, drawing from the knowledge and experiences of two lifetimes that had led to her philosophical reflections.

This insight allowed her to grasp her first principle as a Demoness of Pleasure to some extent.

She didn't withhold any information. On the one hand, she suspected that the Demoness Sect had fostered such an "innocent" and emotionally driven Demoness because they had their sights set on the Sauron family. On the other hand, she recounted the general activities and abilities of the Bliss Society.

Upon hearing the name "Sex Addict" and its corresponding behavior, Browns Sauron's expression grew serious and cautious.

Franca knew when to conclude the conversation. She finished her after-dinner liqueur, rose gracefully, put on her blue bonnet, and departed from the Red House Café.

As she entered the rental carriage and returned to the market district, her mind raced, analyzing potential vulnerabilities.

I need to persuade Jenna to move out. But having her stay in my apartment might reveal my true gender. I must remind her not to display her Assassin and Instigator abilities for the time being...

The issue with Ciel is that if Browns Sauron and Poufer Sauron frequently interact, they might discover that the affluent merchant's generous scion is, in reality, the leader of the market district's mob, exposing the Iron and Blood Cross Order's hidden agenda. Yes, Browns is affiliated with the Demoness Sect and doesn't share the same interests as the Sauron family. There is a significant likelihood that she would conceal this fact and exploit it...

Browns is brimming with emotions. Is she preparing for the "affliction" of a Sequence 5?

"..."

...
Rue du Rossignol, market district.
Lumian "teleported" back to his safe house.
While waiting for Franca to return Lie to him and allow him to revert to his original appearance, he contemplated the rumors circulating about the human blood bread.
It would have been manageable if I had discovered it from the outset, but now it's already widely believed. Hundreds or perhaps thousands of people have bought into it. Tracing it back to the source will be extremely challenging. Moreover, even if I locate the origin, the person responsible may be filled with false information and unable to identify their source... Finding a skilled Psychiatrist who can hypnotize people is quite a task...
The Mandrake rumor La Nou Bruch had heard appears suspicious...
After careful consideration, Lumian decided not to dwell on it. He would report it to Madam Magician and explore the possibility of hiring someone like Madam Susie or even a high-ranking Psychiatrist such as Madam Justice to investigate the source of the rumors.
They were experts in similar operations and possessed all the abilities of "I Know Someone," and even more!
The matter concerning the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings was a shared mission of the Tarot Club.
Likewise, Lumian intended to burden the Major Arcana card holders with the other clue. Given his abilities, it was practically impossible for him to investigate it further.
He believed that since Loki was operating within Bureau 8, there was a chance he had either subtly influenced some of his colleagues or been discovered by them. All these were potential leads.
However, based on his experiences dealing with a Marionettist, Lumian recalled the events at the Alone Bar and the puppet show in the basement. It wasn't as murky as he had initially thought. It exuded an aura of malevolence, obscurity, and terror, and he could distinctly perceive the tangible danger concealed within the various details.
He suspected that most of the spectators at the marionette theater were, in fact, marionettes themselves, fitting the bar's name: Alone!
It seemed that there was only one living person amidst the marionettes!
Of course, this was somewhat exaggerated. It was evident that a few Bureau 8 members were working as bartenders and waitstaff

at the Alone Bar, including Loki and Leah.
Nevertheless, Beyonders capable of manipulating an entire theater filled with marionettes were far more powerful than Loki. They likely exceeded Sequence 5 and might even be demigods of the Seer pathway.
Regardless of Lumian's confidence, he didn't believe he could uncover any clues in a bar protected by a demigod. He didn't dare to attempt it.
Only the Major Arcana card holders of the Tarot Club could conduct a thorough investigation in that direction!
Without hesitation, Lumian unfolded a letter and began reporting his findings to Madam Magician.
As the "doll" messenger was summoned, it cast a glance at Lumian and remarked, "Do you enjoy dressing up?"
Is that because I'm wearing a new face? Lumian smiled and replied, "It's a necessity in certain situations. Disguises help ensure that one remains unrecognized when carrying out certain tasks."
The messenger nodded slowly.
"No wonder you can't tell I'm different every day."
Lumian gazed at the light-golden attire of the "doll" messenger, unsure whether to offer a truthful response or a white lie.
In what way is it different from before?
Observing Lumian's silence, the messenger snatched the letter and stated sharply, "My hair is smoother, my skin is more elastic, and my dress is new..."
With those words, the messenger's voice gradually faded away as it dissolved into the candlelight.
Lumian let out a sigh and muttered to himself, Perhaps the more familiar I become with someone, the less I notice their subtle changes...
It was akin to Franca, who appeared so relaxed around him that she didn't feel the need to rack her brains on many things.
If one had to rack their brains and be on edge when interacting with others, their mental state would inevitably deteriorate over time.
Seeing that it was time, Lumian left Rue du Rossignol and arrived at Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches. He knocked on the door, and Jenna opened it, looking surprised.
"Who might you be?"
Lumian scoffed. "Can't you still not tell from my gait?"
"Dammit, your aura, which makes others want to beat you up, will make your disguise useless!" Jenna knew that Lumian possessed a mystical item capable of altering his appearance.
Once Lumian entered the living room, he glanced around.

"Where's Franca?"
"She hasn't returned from her visit to the Red House Café," Jenna replied, already aware that Franca had intentions of engaging with a member of the Demoness Sect. She had also heard her companion mention the secret organization's animosity towards female Assassins.
Lumian stroked Franca's Mirror Substitution in his arms and settled into an armchair when he saw that nothing was amiss.
This was Jenna's usual spot.
Jenna rolled her eyes at him and perched on the armrest of a nearby chair. She asked thoughtfully,
"Why do you have so many enemies? How many of them are there?"
Lumian had briefly recounted the Cordu disaster but had omitted much of his past. He replied simply, "The Soul Summoning Spell that caused my sister's problem was acquired from an organization called April Fool's. They intentionally sold it to my sister. My current objective is to locate their key members and execute them one by one."
Jenna pursed her lips, refraining from delving into the specifics to avoid upsetting Lumian.
"How can I assist?" she inquired earnestly.
Lumian pondered for a moment and replied, "Your dedication to becoming a Witch is the greatest assistance you can provide me."
Not only were the core members of April Fool's formidable, but they also had no boundaries. Jenna could only participate in the pursuit of these individuals after becoming a Witch and gaining the ability to create a Mirror Substitution of herself.
Internally seething with anger, Jenna refrained from voicing her frustration. She quietly observed Lumian for a few seconds and remarked, "I sense that you're more exhausted than before..."
Lumian subconsciously smiled.
"But I'm also more motivated."
"But isn't this too intense? Franca mentioned that a constantly tense string is prone to snapping. The best approach is to alternate between tension and relaxation," Jenna expressed her concern.
Lumian gave a self-deprecating smile.
"But they won't allow me to relax. They're determined to kill me themselves."
Noticing Jenna's confusion, he added with a cold expression, "They haven't reported me to the authorities despite knowing that I'm a wanted criminal. It's clear they want me to remain in the market district until they finalize their plan and make all the necessary preparations."

Chapter 401: Dreamwalker

From Loki losing control and collapsing without being completely dead, Lumian had been vigilant about being reported by the core members of the April Fool's team and staying prepared for potential surprise attacks from official Beyonders. After all, Loki knew that he was Lumian Lee, a leader of the Savoie Mob, overseeing Salle de Bal Brise. He even knew that Lumian carried the aura of the Blood Emperor Alista Tudor.

In the end, official Beyonders merely approached the market district's police headquarters to inquire about the abnormality that night and to see if Ciel Dubois, a capable mob leader, knew anything.

This convinced Lumian that the April Fool's team still had their sights set on him. They were reluctant to hand their target over to the authorities or force him out of the market district where they could no longer keep an eye on him.

It had to be known that a marionette sealed with an angel was undoubtedly an item that could cause Loki's strength to undergo a significant transformation. Missing out on Lumian meant he could almost never meet another one.

Furthermore, the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings might have a use for Termiboros.

The core members of the April Fool's team were quite direct about this matter. They didn't bother concealing their mockery and malice. They believed Lumian could see through it and expected him to be provoked, eventually choosing to wait in the market district.

When to make their move was entirely up to them. They wouldn't recklessly attack while Lumian had assistance.

Jenna sensed the anger and hostility lurking beneath Lumian's composed demeanor and calm words. She didn't attempt to persuade him further and simply mumbled, "I hope these villains get what's coming to them."

Lumian's emotions had been on an upheaval, causing the lingering effects of his near-loss of control to resurface.

Taking a deep breath, he raised his right hand and massaged his temples to ease the pounding in his head.

"What's wrong?" Jenna asked, her concern evident.

Lumian replied succinctly, "The mental trauma from the battle with Loki will take a week or two to fully heal."

Jenna's eyes darted as she offered, "Do you want me to give you a head massage? Franca taught me. I'm quite skilled at it.

"Don't be shy. We're friends, after all!"

Her last statement trailed off playfully, an attempt to divert Lumian's attention and alleviate his emotional state with a teasing tone.
Lumian scoffed.
"Why do you keep saying that from time to time? 'Franca mentioned this, Franca taught me that.'"
"Don't you often..." Jenna started but abruptly stopped herself.
Initially, she had intended to say, "Don't you often say, 'My sister said that, my sister taught me that.'"
Lumian fell silent, and Jenna did the same. After a few seconds, seeing that Lumian didn't object, Jenna left the chair armrest and moved behind him. She reached out and began massaging his temples and both sides of his head.
Lumian's body tensed up.
Jenna playfully teased, "Have you never been intimate with a girl before?"
Lumian scoffed. "As a Hunter, I would instinctively throw anyone who dared to touch my head or bestow them with a massive fireball. It took a lot of effort not to roast you."
Amused and exasperated, Jenna tightened her grip.
"Did the Provoker potion completely alter your language and speech patterns?"
Lumian responded bluntly, "Yo, why the fancy words?"
As the two of them bantered, Lumian's body gradually relaxed. After a few minutes, he leaned back on the sofa and half-closed his eyes.
While enjoying Jenna's massage and relieving his headache, he naturally brought up the "pranks" of Loki, I Know Someone, and the other core members of the April Fool's team. Jenna's anger flared, and she subconsciously tightened her grip.
"Take it easy," Lumian said with a hint of physical discomfort.
An Assassin possessed considerable strength.
Jenna eased her grip, still fuming.
"I've never encountered such scoundrels or vile individuals in all my performances. They deserve every bit of suffering!
"Dammit, why am I not a Witch yet?"
Lumian's eyes remained closed as he asked, "How's the digestion with the Instigator potion? Have you grasped the principles of acting?"
Jenna's attention shifted. As she continued to knead, she reflected, "There are currently two key points. First, Instigation is a means, not an end. Second, the essence of Instigation lies in understanding the core of the matter and the conditions of the people involved, not in the use of abilities. Additionally, I've come

to a realization. Instigation will inevitably bring about consequences; it just depends on whom you want to face those consequences."
"Not bad," Lumian commended, a rare occurrence.
Standing behind him, Jenna lifted her chin modestly and said, "I find opportunities to practice every day, especially among theater actors and apprentices at places like Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, where conflicts are abundant. Instigating someone forces me to consider who I want to benefit and who will be taught a lesson or suffer losses. It made me realize that instigation is merely a tool."
Lumian's demeanor noticeably softened as he let his thoughts wander. He casually inquired, "Where do you think I might find an opportunity to act as a Pyromaniac?"
Jenna's hands continued their soothing motion as she thought and replied, "Trier is a place of relatively basic order. You can only act on smaller matters; you can't create a major spectacle there...
"But there might be an opportunity during the pursuit of those villains. When you mentioned it earlier, I wanted to set them ablaze!"
Lumian suddenly had an idea, though it wasn't entirely clear.
At that moment, footsteps echoed from the stairs, growing progressively louder.
Jenna released her grip on Lumian's head and approached the door with a smile.
"Franca is back."
...
In the bustling streets of Trier, the night might lack tranquility, but the citizens living in those areas still found their way into slumber.
In one person's dream, they envisioned their children gradually improving and becoming healthier after consuming human blood bread.
Suddenly, a golden retriever carrying a small backpack made an appearance in the dream.
The golden retriever sat at the dream's edge, guiding the hazy scenes to reveal hidden memories deep in the dreamer's subconscious.
It was the excitement of pushing through the crowd and rushing towards the death row inmate's corpse with bread in hand. It was the hesitation that came after believing that human blood bread could cure illnesses. It was the mixture of joy and skepticism that had accompanied their first hearing of this rumor...
The golden retriever caught sight of the figure who had initially

informed the dreamer about the blood bread rumors. It turned out to be a neighbor who lived next door.
And so, the golden retriever traversed dream after dream, activating the corresponding subconscious memories to search for the source of the blood bread rumors.
After hundreds of dreams, the golden retriever noticed two dreams with clear contradictions.
One belonged to a father who believed that he had obtained the secret of human blood bread from a Warlock he happened to meet, using it to cure his daughter's illness. The other dream belonged to his child, who had suddenly fallen ill and then just as suddenly recovered, as if the human blood bread was a miraculous elixir.
The golden retriever guided the father to manifest the Warlock in his dream.
It was very ordinary and unremarkable.
Scenes in the dream flickered rapidly, and the image of the Warlock began to change, memories flowing back.
When their initial encounter was revealed, the golden retriever saw a Warlock with a completely different face from before!
Then, the face rapidly shifted, eventually settling into the image the dreamer normally associated with the Warlock.
The golden retriever had her own interpretation of this.
The Warlock's Hypnosis could only be fully effective in a face-to-face encounter, allowing the dreamer to retain their first impression of him. Only then would they be affected by the hypnosis and have the image in their memory altered.
There was no need to repeat the process of awakening the subconscious within the dream. The original image of the Warlock naturally surfaced in the golden retriever's mind.
He had short brown hair, parted in a 3-7 split, flaxen-colored eyes, and a thin, freckled face. He wore gold-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his nose...
Exiting the dream, the golden retriever turned her attention to Madam Magician, who had suddenly appeared beside her. In a human voice, she declared, "I've obtained a result."
Dressed in a blouse and a long brown dress, Madam Magician sighed and eagerly said, "Give me the information, and I'll confirm it."
The golden retriever remained silent, her eyes darkening.
After a few seconds, Madam Magician took a few steps forward, causing starlight to manifest around her.
It resembled a reflection of the vast cosmos on the ground.
The resplendent and condensed stars spun rapidly, providing a revelation.

Once Madam Magician finished interpreting, she pulled open an illusory door hidden in the darkness and disappeared.
In just over ten seconds, she reappeared and said to the golden retriever, "There's no target on the street the astromancy results point to."
"Were we misled?" the golden retriever inquired in a female voice once more.
Madam Magician nodded and smirked. "But this also proves that what you've seen is the actual target."
As she finished speaking, Madam Justice, clad in a white dress with green trimmings, swiftly materialized.
"Where did you go?" Magician asked in puzzlement.
Madam Justice replied in a gentle voice, "To plant a cue in the dreams of those seeking human blood bread. I've informed them that The Fool Pharmaceutical Company will conduct a volunteer consultation in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative this weekend, offering free treatment and medicine."
"When do you plan to hold the volunteer consultation?" Magician asked out of curiosity.
Madam Justice smiled.
"Tomorrow. I'll sponsor it."
...
At 6 a.m., Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.
Lumian naturally woke up from his dream and got ready for the day.
Before he could decide on breakfast, he noticed the "doll" messenger appearing and delivering a letter.
Puzzled, Lumian unfolded the letter and saw a portrait.
Beside the portrait was Madam Magician's handwriting: "This should be what I Know Someone looks like. We'll mobilize all the card holders in Trier to search for him, including you."

Chapter 402: Good Luck

Lumian examined the portrait in his hand and let out a chuckle.

He hadn't anticipated that the Major Arcana card holders would swiftly uncover the source of the rumors and unveil I Know Someone's true identity.

It made sense. Rumors had started circulating two to three months ago, and Lumian hadn't yet arrived in Trier or infiltrated the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. Loki and I Know Someone hadn't met with any genuine threats. They were naturally audacious when it came to pulling pranks. No matter how cautious they were, leaving traces behind was inevitable.

While it might be challenging for other Beyonders to detect these traces, Madam Justice was a high-ranking Beyonder of the Spectator pathway, also known as the Psychiatrist pathway. She possessed a profound understanding of I Know Someone's various abilities and was his match in every aspect.

Even if this Major Arcana card holder herself didn't execute the operation, her partner, Susie, was more than capable of completing the mission. Lumian knew that this lady was at least a Sequence 5 of the Psychiatrist pathway, just one step away from becoming a demigod.

Gazing at the portrait of I Know Someone, with gold-rimmed glasses, a freckled face, and a thin visage, Lumian caressed the paper and muttered to himself, "Wherever you go, you leave your mark... One day, those unable to control their sinister desires will be exposed."

Taking the portrait, he knocked on Room 305 before Anthony Reid, who frequently came and went from Auberge du Coq Doré.

"Keep an eye on this individual for me. He's most likely a doctor or a medical researcher." Lumian presented the portrait to Anthony Reid, who was disguised as a clerk.

Then, he briefly recounted I Know Someone's performance at the gathering and a few of his typical pranks. He asked earnestly, "Where could someone like him be hiding?"

Anthony Reid sighed and replied, "I'm a Psychiatrist, not a Seer.

"You mentioned that he often exhibited extensive medical knowledge at gatherings?"

Receiving Lumian's affirmation, Anthony Reid pondered for a moment and continued,

"In a gathering filled with pranks, the various details displayed by a Beyonder of the Spectator pathway are what he wants you to remember. They don't necessarily reflect his true identity and could even be misleading.

"I suspect that I Know Someone isn't actually a doctor, but he possesses a deep understanding of medicine and has accumulated extensive knowledge."
Not a doctor... Madam Magician's letter had also mentioned not restricting the search to doctors... But this way, millions of people in Trier could be suspects... Lumian felt both relieved and frustrated.
Anthony Reid added, "A person with antisocial tendencies and enough intelligence might have a fondness for flirting with danger. He enjoys playing with others like a clown. Perhaps it won't be long before he pulls another prank, mocking all those who pursue him."
The only condition being that he remains unaware of the many demigods observing this matter... Lumian watched as Anthony Reid hastily departed and then turned toward Rue des Blouses Blanches.
He had initially intended to locate Lugano Toscano, a quasi-doctor, and inquire if he recognized the person in the portrait. However, it was still too early for that. Salle de Gristmill had not yet opened, and he had no information about where Lugano resided.
Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Franca had already risen early, having also received a letter from her Major Arcana card holder, and was discussing the potential course of their investigation with Jenna.
Franca cautioned Lumian, saying, "We can't involve too many information brokers in the search. I Know Someone might notice it beforehand and change his appearance or leave Trier."
Lumian nodded slowly and responded, "It's nearly impossible to locate someone like this in Trier on our own...
"Don't forget we still have Anthony." Franca winked at Lumian, implying that they had all the card holders in Trier on their side.
"Yes, and I'm here to help too," Jenna chimed in.
Lumian tersely acknowledged her words and decided to proceed with his original plan to begin with doctors.
...
In the afternoon, Jenna arrived at Avenue du Marché and patiently waited by the public carriage stop sign.
Today, she had donned a beige dress and a light brown straw hat, which shielded her from the sun and was adorned with a few cloth flowers. Her brownish-yellow hair was neatly tied into a bun at the back, with the rest cascading naturally.
Without any makeup, her face remained fresh, and her blue eyes held a sweeter charm despite the absence of black eyeliner.
Jenna boarded a public carriage and headed towards Quartier 7,

Quartier des Thermes.
Situated on the west side of Quartier de l'Observatoire, this district boasted a pleasant environment and was home to many affluent individuals. The now-bankrupt owner of the Goodville Chemical Factory had once lived here, as had the Hôtel du Cygne Blanc, where Charlie had worked as an apprentice attendant.
Quartier des Thermes, also known as the Museum District, featured numerous renowned museums. Adjacent to one of the hot springs lay Delta Asylum, Trier's largest and most formal asylum.
Jenna was visiting Showy Diva, the underground singer who had once taken care of her. Showy Diva had been the victim of rape by Margot of the Poison Spur Mob and had subsequently left the market district to reside in an asylum.
After Lumian eliminated Margot, Jenna had intentionally approached Showy Diva to share the good news. Since then, she had been regularly visiting her.
Initially, Jenna had limited funds and was preoccupied with repaying her debts, so she couldn't do much for her friend. However, when Lumian hunted the padre, Jenna earned a substantial sum of 5,000 verl d'or. Coupled with two compensations and various other sources of income, she still had over 7,500 verl d'or left after repaying all her debts, except the one to Franca.
With less pressure from Franca to repay the debt, Jenna could now afford to allocate a portion of her money to send the former Showy Diva to Delta Asylum, where the facilities, environment, doctors, and nurses were clearly superior.
She visited her friend regularly, partly to pay the fees and partly to demonstrate to the doctors and nurses that this patient had family and friends looking out for her. Anyone who dared to mistreat her would have someone to answer to.
Jenna disembarked from the public carriage, adjusted her brown straw hat, and proceeded along a bustling street.
After a few steps, she noticed a seven- or eight-year-old boy standing alone by the roadside.
The boy had a chubby face and was dressed in the attire of a young gentleman. His neatly combed light-yellow hair complemented his appearance.
Seeing the confusion in the boy's eyes, Jenna approached, crouched down, and asked gently,
"Are you lost? Do you need me to take you to the police station or bring a police officer here?"
The boy sported a mercury bow tie on his white shirt. He sighed and replied, "I'm not lost. It's just that a lady who likes to drink

asked me for a favor. I didn't know how to help, and it seemed a bit dangerous where she went, so I decided to wait here."
Over there... Jenna followed the boy's outstretched finger and realized he was referring to either Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, the market district, or Quartier du Jardin Botanique.
"Why did you choose to wait here to help?" Jenna couldn't quite fathom the child's reasoning.
The chubby boy let out another sigh and said, "I don't know why. My instincts just told me to do it."
At this point, the boy looked up at Jenna with a pitiful expression.
"Could you buy me some ice-cream? The weather in Trier is unbearably hot!"
"Where's the lady who likes to drink and asked for your help?" Jenna inquired, her curiosity mixed with caution.
The boy scanned the area and replied, "After I said I wanted to wait here, she went off by herself to find a place to drink."
Isn't this too irresponsible? *What if the child goes missing?* Jenna couldn't help but frown.
The boy eagerly asked again, "You can buy ice-cream from this café. That way, I can have ice-cream and wait inside without worrying about getting lost."
Jenna, now financially stable, hesitated for a moment before agreeing, "What flavor would you like?"
"Vanilla!" the boy quickly exclaimed with enthusiasm.
Jenna then spent 1 verl d'or to purchase a cup of vanilla ice-cream for the boy from a nearby café.
Seated by the window, the boy received the ice-cream with pure delight on his face.
"Thank you. You'll be lucky!"
Jenna paid little attention to his gratitude. Instead, she observed as the boy joyfully savored the ice-cream and then quickly left. She found patrolling constables and informed them of a missing child in the café ahead.
Once she saw that the two constables had entered the café, Jenna breathed a sigh of relief and continued on her way with determined steps.
Before long, she arrived at the Delta Asylum.
The asylum was situated near a hot spring, and behind a wall, there stood a three-story building with a grayish-blue exterior and an annex. The surroundings were adorned with lush lawns bathed in the golden sunlight, along with various mobility aids. It was an excellent environment.
Jenna successfully met with her friend.

The former Showy Diva, like other female patients, had short hair that reached her ears. Her face appeared ordinary, and her eyes held a serene expression. She seemed no different from an ordinary person.

When Jenna conversed with her, it was easy to forget that she was afflicted by mental illness. However, Jenna knew all too well that provoking her could lead to an immediate and frenzied outburst, endangering both herself and others.

After chatting for nearly half an hour, Jenna left the designated meeting room, ready to depart.

As she walked along the outer corridor, she gazed out of the window absentmindedly.

On a green lawn, around 20 to 30 mental patients strolled leisurely, each lost in their own thoughts. They leaned against trees, soaked in the sun, or gathered in small groups, engaging in quiet conversations.

They appeared just like ordinary people.

Jenna scanned the surroundings casually, preparing to shift her attention elsewhere.

At that moment, she spotted a figure dressed in a blue-and-white striped hospital gown.

The figure stood tall at over 1.75 meters. His short brown hair was parted in a 3-7 fashion. Gold-rimmed glasses mostly concealed his flaxen-colored eyes, and his face appeared notably thin, adorned with freckles. In that moment, he paced back and forth on the green lawn, seemingly lost in deep contemplation, as if pondering some philosophical question.

Jenna's pupils dilated.

Th-this is I Know Someone!

Chapter 403: Drawing From Experience

Jenna's instincts screamed at her to turn around, her fear that the psychiatric patient, suspected to be I Know Someone, might catch her staring.

Yet, in almost the same instant, she recalled how she'd acted around Hugues Artois. With that memory in mind, she controlled her neck, shifting her gaze away with a slow, natural motion.

She kept her composure, exiting the grayish-blue building one step at a time, stepping into the sunlight that poured through the window. Jenna donned a light brown straw hat adorned with cloth flowers.

As she finally left Delta Asylum, returning to the same street where she had first encountered the mysterious boy, Jenna let out a sigh of relief.

Her expression remained unchanged as she boarded the public carriage bound for the bustling market district.

...

In the evening, at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Apartment 601.

Lumian, who had been summoned by Jenna, listened to her findings intently.

Lumian couldn't conceal his surprise and suspicion.

"Is this for real? Are you sure you didn't see it wrong?"

Wasn't this just too much of a coincidence?

Jenna had only laid eyes on the portrait of "I Know Someone" that morning, and in the afternoon, she had tracked down the target at Delta Asylum—a place she had visited just twice. Lumian, Franca, and the Major Arcana and Minor Arcana card holders in Trier had turned up nothing!

The sheer coincidence here made Lumian's instincts tingle with hints of conspiracy and arrangements, robbing him of any tangible joy.

"That's right. Isn't this too darn coincidental..." Franca's demeanor had been skeptical even before Lumian's arrival.

She muttered, "Though it's a classic move for an antisocial, intelligent fellow to hide in an asylum and rub shoulders with the doctors, should he really be unlucky enough to cross paths with a visitor who's seen his wanted poster? There can't be more than 50 people in Trier who've laid eyes on that wanted poster!"

This tally included Anthony Reid and the inquiries made by the other card holders today.

"Why didn't I know of such a classic scenario..." Jenna mumbled. "But I did stumble upon him. I'm not mistaken. Maybe I've just been lucky lately?"

At this point, she noticed the disbelief etched on Lumian and Franca's faces.
Lumian, a man well-versed in the power of coincidence, pondered and asked, "Recall this morning and see if any other coincidences stand out, or if anything unusual occurred."
Seated in an armchair, Jenna delved deep into her thoughts.
After nearly fifteen minutes, she cussed, "It's business as usual! Uh, there is one thing I've never encountered before..."
She recounted how she had come across a lost boy and treated him to a cup of vanilla ice-cream. She had also found constables to watch over him. Finally, she inquired with uncertainty,
"There shouldn't be anything unusual about that, right?"
Franca mumbled to herself, "Did the boy mention anything about you receiving good luck?"
Lumian honed in on another detail.
"Did he say he was brought here by a lady who loves drinking?"
"Yes," Jenna replied to the two questions with a single word.
Lumian immediately grew suspicious.
Apart from a few dancers, he only knew of two ladies who were quite fond of alcohol. The rest were just casual social drinkers.
One was Madame Hela, and the other was Madam Magician.
The former always carried multiple flasks of liquor with her, while the latter reveled in tasting various alcoholic beverages, and she could even summon a glass of wine from thin air and savor it.
Since the hunt for I Know Someone was a shared mission of the Tarot Club, and Madame Hela hadn't been informed about it, Lumian cautiously deduced that the boy had been brought to Trier by Madam Magician.
Combined with Franca's question about Jenna's "receiving good luck," Lumian believed that the boy possessed extraordinary abilities that could bestow good fortune upon others. Jenna, having experienced this stroke of luck, was naturally fortunate enough to cross paths with "I Know Someone."
As Lumian and Franca fell silent for what felt like minutes, Jenna's unease deepened.
"Is there really a problem with this situation?"
Lumian gazed thoughtfully at his companion and responded, "It's possible that your luck has taken a favorable turn today, starting with your act of buying ice-cream for that young boy."
Such exchanges of giving and receiving were not uncommon in the realm of Inevitability. For example, the enhancement of luck often required the recipient to willingly accept the medium and derive some benefit from it. Moreover, there had to be a subjective desire on their part to complete the luck-enhancing ritual.

Therefore, Lumian had a reasonable suspicion that the boy might be a Beyonder of the Monster Pathway, also known as the Fate Pathway. Through a subtle transaction involving ice-cream and the bestowal of good luck, he had orchestrated Jenna's encounter with I Know Someone.
The phrases like "I didn't know how to help, so I decided to wait here" or "Buy me ice-cream, and you'll have good luck" had all the mysterious signs of the Fate domain!
"That's right..." Franca had clearly considered this possibility.
Jenna immediately understood.
"Are you suggesting that this boy might be an exceptionally powerful Beyonder? That he granted me an abundance of good luck?
"But apart from encountering I Know Someone, I haven't felt anything extraordinary. I haven't stumbled upon any money or come across free items."
Franca sighed, explaining, "Meeting I Know Someone probably consumed all the good luck you were given."
Lumian abruptly stood up.
"I need to verify this."
He made his way into Franca's bedroom and closed the door behind him.
Curious, Jenna asked Franca, "How is he planning to confirm it?"
Franca speculated and replied, "He's going to write a letter."
"To Madame Hela?" Jenna knew that the woman had a messenger.
Franca couldn't give a clear answer. "Another lady."
In her bedroom, Lumian, who had tidied up the altar, promptly received a response from Madam Magician.
"So, that's how we found I Know Someone. Even as an Astrologer, I find this matter charlatanic.
"There's no need to doubt that it was indeed a helper we hired. We expended a considerable number of favors and a substantial amount of ice-cream.
"Since there's a result, take action. I'll keep an eye on you and help guard against any unforeseen incidents."
As expected... Lumian grinned.
From Madam Magician's words, he deduced that the boy wasn't a member of the Tarot Club. Hence, he wouldn't participate in shared missions without receiving some form of compensation, which in this case involved favors and ice-cream.
What the hell is up with ice-cream? Can such a powerful Beyonder be moved by ice-cream? Lumian found it absurd and amusing. However, he recalled Baron Brignais's godson, a rather peculiar individual who could be swayed by delectable treats.

This led him to wonder if Beyonders in a boy's form had similar "weaknesses."
Lumian pushed open the door and returned to the living room.
Nervously, Jenna stood up and inquired, "Did you confirm it?"
"He's a helper with the specific task of bestowing good luck, and your encounter with him was orchestrated by fate. By treating him to ice-cream, you'd chosen the correct path of destiny," Lumian responded, using the manner of a charlatan.
As a Beyonder with dominion over the Inevitability domain, he held a certain sway over fate.
"Phew..." Jenna let out a sigh of relief, her worries about falling into a trap dissipating.
Seeing Franca rise from her seat, Lumian produced the silver Lie earring with a smirk.
"Let's head to the asylum now. I can't wait."
"Very well," Franca replied, her inner thoughts sighing.
Ever since Ciel's arrival, she had been embroiled in constant battles.
It had been just a few days since Loki's attack!
...
In a four-wheeled, four-seater rental carriage en route to Quartier des Thermes, Lumian gazed out of the window at the black street lamp poles and furrowed his brow.
He muttered to himself in confusion, "Did Jenna truly spot I Know Someone?"
Franca and Jenna turned their attention to him, simultaneously recalling a similar situation:
From their hunt for the padre, Guillaume Bénet, they had encountered two substitutes in succession, and the actual Guillaume Bénet had turned out to be a large dog lounging by the side!
Franca lowered her voice and inquired, "Do you suspect it might be a substitute?"
Drawing lessons from past experiences and expanding their awareness was crucial. After witnessing the padre's clever deception, failing to consider such possibilities would signify their inadequacy in the Hunter and Demoness pathways.
Lumian pondered for a moment and whispered, "With his issue coming to light and the potential pursuit he might face, wouldn't I Know Someone be concerned that the 'pranks' of the past few months could become a lingering threat?
"If I were in his shoes and couldn't erase the corresponding traces, I'd leave Trier swiftly and return after some time. Yet, he hasn't done that.

"This suggests that he either possesses ample confidence that we won't locate him, or he has something of significance to accomplish in Trier. In that case, remaining in the shadows while presenting a substitute in plain sight would be a clever choice."
Jenna, puzzled, asked, "Could it be that he also wields Lie or the Substitution Spell you mentioned?"
Lumian chuckled.
"He may not have Lie, but the evil god he believes in governs the Seer domain and ranks as one of the most potent Faceless. With mastery of the corresponding ritualistic magic, he can beseech this deity to alter the appearance of a specific target."
It was akin to how members of the Tarot Club could summon creatures from the spirit realm in the name of Mr. Fool.
Using Faceless-related ritualistic magic to create a substitute while secretly monitoring in person... But why didn't he just change his appearance? *Why resort to creating a substitute?* It would make him virtually untraceable! Franca thought of a dangerous possibility.
Lumian nodded.
"If the individual in Delta Asylum is indeed a substitute, it implies that he serves as a trap and is intentionally using it to lure us in. I Know Someone will undoubtedly pay close attention to the eventual outcome.
"Consequently, either the extreme peril concealed within the substitute will not only ensnare the pursuer but also cause a significant disturbance, or the two individuals are intimately connected in some mystical manner.
"Don't be concerned about the first scenario. With a formidable lady guarding against mishaps, the ensuing possibilities will depend on you, Franca..."
If the person in the asylum turned out to be I Know Someone, the situation would be relatively straightforward.
...
Late at night, in a room on the third floor of Delta Asylum's eastern wing.
A pair of gold-rimmed glasses sat on the bedside table, reflecting the moonlight filtering into the room. The patient in the bed was fast asleep.
Suddenly, a shadowy figure opened the substantial door adorned with iron bars and quietly entered.
With a polite grip, the intruder gently shut the door, rendering the room impervious to external sounds.
The entire interior space seemed to be sealed.

Chapter 404: Patient

Lumian harnessed the power of the Decency brooch, distorting the door and sealing the entire room.

With Lie altering his appearance, Lumian refrained from an immediate attack on the patient lying in the bed. Instead, he strolled to the side, casting a discerning eye upon him.

The patient's eyes remained tightly shut, lost in a deep slumber. His facial features, hairstyle, and hair color undeniably matched those of I Know Someone.

As Lumian observed this slumbering figure, who had no realization of his intrusion, he began to suspect that this might be a substitute.

As suggested by Madam Magician's letter, I Know Someone was at least a Sequence 6 Hypnotist of the Psychiatrist pathway, with a slight chance of being a Sequence 5 Dreamwalker. On either pathway, these individuals were skilled observers, unlikely to sleep soundly in the presence of an intruder.

The conundrum now lay in discerning the trap with such a substitution.

Beneath the faint moonlight filtering through the curtains, the patient on the bed suddenly snapped open his eyes.

In those flaxen-colored eyes, Lumian's image was instantly mirrored.

Simultaneously, Lumian once more glimpsed the dark void, the countless twinkling stars, and the mysterious symbol that had come to life, forming an invisible door.

A voice resonated within his heart and ears, seemingly emanating from the depths of the void and the source of his consciousness.

"Pass through it. Pass through this formless door, and you will gain a transformative experience in your life and boundless knowledge..."

"Everyone possesses godhood and can hear the voice of this world's origin. To hear it clearly, you must open this invisible door and step inside..."

Lumian's head throbbed as he "witnessed" the gradual opening of the formless door. Each word from the voice transformed into a living, peculiar entity within his heart.

Once more, the voice echoed, its tone tinged with perplexity and confusion. It muttered to itself, "Where is the end of the world? What did the universe resemble at its inception...

"Which deity brought all of this into existence, and who created Him...

"What lies beyond the confines of the universe? How do other

worlds differ...
"What sets human nature apart from godhood? Does true self-awareness equate to human nature or godhood...
"Where lies the demarcation between madness and reason? Is madness the ultimate destination for every living being..."
Lumian's head throbbed with agony as he absorbed these questions, a fusion of mystical contemplation and the pursuit of answers to profound philosophical queries. It was the first time in a long while that he felt the sensation of a steel drill boring into his skull, stirring his delicate brain.
Moreover, these questions triggered bizarre alterations in his spirituality and his surroundings.
Madness surged forth, as if probing the boundaries of sanity. The enveloping darkness seemed to take on human nature, visibly writhing. The bed before him and the floor beneath his feet gradually etched out bizarre patterns. Even though Lumian couldn't see them, his body was suddenly consumed by an intense itch, as if yearning to shed his outermost layer of skin...
"Is there something that surpasses all limitations and conceptual thinking..." the voice persisted in questioning the void.
Within the writhing darkness, an indescribable form began to take shape.
Lumian found himself powerless to resist or halt this transformation. All he could do was witness it helplessly as an overwhelming terror descended, his head throbbing.
In that critical moment, a blinding and brilliant bolt of lightning erupted right before him.
The colossal dendrite appeared as if it had sprung forth from a divine realm, and each silver-white "branch" emitted a crackling sound.
Rumble!
As the silver lightning struck the patient on the bed, Lumian was assaulted by a deafening thunderclap that reverberated through his eardrums and resonated within his soul.
The strange creature that had animated those thought-provoking questions convulsed his body, significantly easing the throbbing pain in his head, leaving behind only a disorienting sensation caused by the deafening roar.
A terrifying cascade of lightning surged across the patient on the bed, sending waves of agony and paralysis coursing through Lumian's skin, even though he stood a few steps away.
In the midst of this electric frenzy, a holy chant echoed faintly, as if proclaiming, "I came, I saw, I recorded." The ward darkened, as if it had been thrust into a mysterious realm, isolated from the

outside world by some insurmountable force.
Lumian exhaled and shifted his gaze back to the bed. There, he beheld the patient's entire form transformed into a pitch-black, charcoal-like substance, emitting an eerie burnt odor.
The body, still clad in tattered hospital gown, bedsheets, and blanket, began to dissipate, morphing into a dark silhouette.
On the surface of this shadowy figure, cracks materialized, each adorned with mystical symbols and patterns. These formations resembled eyes or myriad mouths that incessantly opened and closed.
Before Lumian could fully fathom this transformation, his vision was flooded with pure, radiant, golden sunlight.
Once more, the ethereal, holy voice resonated in his ears.
When his vision settled back into normalcy, only a faint black mark remained on the scorched surface of the bed, twisting in an uncanny, serpent-like manner.
It's indeed a trap... Lumian mused, his lack of surprise evident.
He also deduced that both the patient and one of Loki's marionettes were recipients of the same evil god's boon based on the starry void and the formless door formed by wandering symbols. The substitute for I Know Someone clearly occupied a higher Sequence.
Had Loki and I Know Someone once targeted a secret organization that worshiped an evil deity?
This is the will of the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth? *What did He seek to achieve?*
Did this all somehow tie into I Know Someone's decision to remain in Trier?
Is this substitute merely a taunting jest aimed at those who pursue them?
I know you're on the hunt for me, and I'm aware of the clues you may uncover. Yet, I'm intentionally granting you a glimmer of hope?
Thoughts raced through Lumian's mind like lightning as he attempted to analyze the current situation from I Know Someone's perspective and extract clues about the fugitive's whereabouts.
Given the level of danger posed by the patient, Lumian deduced that both I Know Someone and Loki would have struggled to capture him alive and recruit him into their team.
With Loki possessing a marionette with a similar pathway, it seemed clear that the patient hadn't actively and consciously cooperated with them.
This, coupled with the bewildered tone and endless questions of the substitute, led Lumian to suspect that the man had succumbed

to madness due to some knowledge or truth gained through the boon or the use of some abilities, rendering him a true mental patient.
Leveraging his professional skills as a Psychiatrist, I Know Someone had likely skillfully guided the patient, fostering a sense of trust and camaraderie. Eventually, he reached a point where he could "convince" the patient, enabling him to perform a ritual and request a change in appearance.
Glancing at the iron-barred window, Lumian noticed that the deep darkness had receded. Crimson moonlight filtered through the relatively thin glass and bathed the ward in its glow.
Conversely, the darkness that had once been typical at Delta Asylum's periphery had intensified. The void seemed distorted, as if encased in a spherical barrier.
Madam Magician hadn't employed any additional abilities after dealing with the dangerous patient. She had merely concealed the entire asylum and its surrounding lawn.
It appeared as though she was implying that Lumian needed to handle this situation independently. She only assisted by preventing any disturbances from alerting Trier's official Beyonders.
Lumian breathed a sigh of relief. Starting from his search for Loki, he quickly filtered through the matters related to April Fool's.
Slowly, a conjecture formed, weaving together the pieces of the puzzle into a cohesive "narrative."
I Know Someone had once been connected to Delta Asylum, whether as a doctor, nurse, or patient. One day, he had stumbled upon a peculiar patient who incessantly posed profound philosophical questions.
Guided by the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings, I Know Someone had initiated interactions with the patient. During this process, he had likely sensed the presence of an evil god's bestowed lurking around the patient. Consequently, with the assistance of Loki, they had driven away these problematic figures and gained control over the strange patient. Loki had even managed to gain a marionette.
Upon Loki's resurrection, I Know Someone, who had been alerted, had leveraged the patient's trust in him to perform ritualistic magic and beseech the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings, resulting in his transformation into a substitute and a walking trap.
As for I Know Someone himself, he must have successfully altered his appearance; his whereabouts now unknown.
Amidst Lumian's frustration, he suddenly thought of something.

Jenna had indeed encountered the substitute for I Know Someone, thanks to good luck.
However, encountering a substitute, one designed as a trap, hardly constituted good luck.
This was unlucky!
That was unless they could somehow use the substitute to trace back to I Know Someone or if Jenna had encountered both the substitute and the real I Know Someone but failed to recognize or directly see him!
Both scenarios pointed toward a high probability that the elusive I Know Someone was still lurking within the asylum!
Even if the trap ultimately failed, pursuers would likely conclude that I Know Someone had long since relocated to a new hiding place.
Beneath an oil lamp lay the darkest and most easily overlooked spot!
With this revelation, Lumian acted swiftly. He spun around, heaved open the heavy door, and sprinted into the asylum's corridor.
With a resounding crash, he burst through a window at the stairwell's corner, landing on the lawn encircled by the main building and its adjoining structures.
Simultaneously, he employed the Niese Face to transform into the patient he had encountered earlier.
In a commanding voice, Lumian bellowed his questions to the cosmos from the lawn:
"Where is the end of the world? What did the universe resemble at its inception...
"Which deity brought all of this into existence, and who created Him..."
His voice resonated throughout the asylum, reaching into every room.
A few seconds later, Franca's voice echoed in Lumian's ears.
"There's an abnormality in the doctor's duty room and the nurse's workstation on the first floor, as well as in the first ward on the third floor near the west wing."
Upon hearing his companion's report, Lumian couldn't help but chuckle.
He pressed his hands against the void before him, instantly igniting crimson flames.
The flames spread swiftly, illuminating the invisible spiderwebs that enshrouded the entire building.
These intricate layers of spiderwebs extended into every room, diligently monitoring the movements of all its inhabitants.

This complex setup had consumed nearly half of Franca's spirituality and required a significant amount of time to prepare and maintain.

The crimson flames transformed into three blazing serpents, each colossal in size, which slithered through the spiderwebs toward the doctor's duty room and nurse's workstation on the first floor, as well as the ward on the third floor.

Chapter 405: No Reservations

The blazing serpents reflected in the eyes of the doctor on duty, the three night nurses, and the patient who had woken up. Fear appeared on their faces, and they turned around in various panicked movements. As they fled in the opposite direction of the flames, they shouted, "Fire! Fire!"

"Help! Help!"

As their voices echoed, the flaming serpents burned the invisible threads of spider silk, accompanied by a scorching wind formed by the clash of cold and heat. It pursued them relentlessly, blocking the exit from the room and forcing them into a corner.

The five of them acted normally. They darted around, searching for a safe escape, wrapping themselves in blankets, and attempting to force their way through the wall of flames. They also rushed to another window, with the intention of jumping down.

It seemed Lumian had misjudged the situation. Any abnormal movements didn't necessarily mean I Know Someone. If this continued, he risked incinerating five innocent people.

However, the three crimson flaming serpents showed no hesitation. They continued to pursue the doctor on duty, the night nurses, and the mental patient, emanating an icy, ruthless madness that showed no regard for human life.

As the blazing serpents closed in on their targets, a few of them began to show signs of despair. The patient on the third-floor ward suddenly halted and turned around.

Grayish-white, stone-like scales sprouted on his once ordinary face, covering his skin that was not concealed by the blue-and-white-striped hospital gown.

In an instant, he transformed into a horrifying, lizard-like figure. The grayish-white scales resisted the scorching flames and aided him in breaking through the barrier of the crimson serpent.

Sensing this transformation through the flames, Lumian's lips curled into an eerie grin.

According to the information provided in Madam Magician's letter, Beyonders of the Spectator pathway at Sequence 6 Hypnotist would gain an ability known as Dragon Scales. This ability allowed them to manifest grayish-white scales on their skin, greatly reducing and resisting damage.

This ability was closely tied to the Spectator pathway's Mythical Creature form, as every high-ranking Spectator ultimately transformed into a dragon—a mind dragon!

The appearance of Dragon Scales confirmed that the patient in the

west wing on the third floor was at least a Sequence 6 Beyonder of the Spectator pathway. Combined with the trap and his unusual movements, the patient's identity became evident—I Know Someone!

Lumian activated the black mark on his right shoulder and used his ability to traverse the spirit world, instantly appearing in the ward.

During this hunt, he refrained from wearing the Lie earring or carrying the Flog boxing gloves. This was because his adversary was a formidable Psychiatrist, and any openings in his emotions or desires could be easily exploited.

As Lumian's figure vanished from the lawn, the crimson fire serpents, which had expanded from consuming flammable materials in the doctor's duty room and nurse's workstation, abruptly dissipated. They transformed into glimmering specks of light that disappeared before the faces of the despairing and terrified onlookers.

Apart from the charred remnants of various items, there was little evidence of the inferno they had narrowly escaped.

On the third floor of Delta Asylum, Lumian emerged from a room adjacent to the west wing. His gaze locked onto the patient, whose body was covered in grayish-white scales, and whose eyes emitted a faint golden hue.

He didn't exchange pleasantries or make inquiries. Instead, he opened his mouth and let out a sharp exclamation: "Ha!"

An imperceptible yellow beam shot forth from Lumian's mouth, aimed at the suspected I Know Someone.

However, at a distance of two to three meters, the pale-yellow aura beam by the Spell of Harrumph brushed past the Beyonder and struck the iron-barred glass window behind him.

Battle Hypnotism!

This was one of a Hypnotist's Beyonder abilities. It could forcefully hypnotize an enemy in battle, causing them to act irrationally or make incorrect judgments. However, such actions couldn't directly harm the hypnotized person, and the effect would wear off quickly as they regained their senses.

Just moments ago, when Lumian and the Beyonder locked eyes, the former had unwittingly fallen under his hypnosis. He had mistaken his own reflection in the glass window for his target, causing the Spell of Harrumph to veer off course.

Seizing the opportunity, I Know Someone's light-gold eyes widened, reflecting Lumian's male Aurore form.

Lumian's head jerked backward, as if caught in a whirlwind.

His emotions swirled with a mixture of joy and hatred. Crimson

flames surged beneath his skin, and his eyes glinted with a sinister madness.

Frenzy!

This was a Psychiatrist's Beyonder ability designed to trigger intense emotions and destabilize the target's mental state, causing them to enter a Frenzied state and suffer severe mental damage. If the target had existing psychological issues or strong emotions, they might even lose control when subjected to Frenzy.

Before undergoing psychiatric treatment from Madam Susie and Madam Justice, encountering I Know Someone in this state could send Lumian spiraling into madness, turning him into a monstrous figure.

At that moment, magma-like blood dripped from his nose. His mind was in disarray, and he instinctively took deep breaths, temporarily losing the ability to execute his planned moves.

I Know Someone refrained from launching another attack on Lumian at that moment. Firstly, causing the other party to lose control or perish would lead to the immediate release of the high-level creature sealed within his body, a sight that could drive even a Beyonder below the demigod level to mental and physical collapse. Secondly, since Muggle's brother was present, it was likely that Hidden Blade wasn't far away. The invisible spider silk that had been ignited was likely her handiwork.

In this dire situation, I Know Someone's first instinct was to swiftly exit the battlefield, escape Delta Asylum, and find a place to conceal himself once more.

In an instant, he retrieved a broken arrow from the pocket of his blue-and-white-striped hospital gown.

The broken arrow looked ancient, with an obsidian-like arrowhead at its tip, adorned with mysterious patterns.

With a squelching sound, I Know Someone thrust the obsidian arrow into his own chest.

The item sprang to life, greedily absorbing the crimson blood that flowed forth.

I Know Someone immediately sprinted toward the tightly sealed door, leaving behind an afterimage.

Despite the grayish-white Dragon Scales covering his face, he exuded an uncanny charm, as if he had transformed into a dashing young dragon.

This was the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty. By piercing it into his chest and feeding it his blood, it temporarily transformed I Know Someone into a Vampire. This granted him extraordinary speed, accelerated regeneration, and a few spell-like abilities.

Bang!

As I Know Someone pushed open the heavy, solid door of the asylum ward, he failed to dart into the corridor. He collided with an ice barrier that had formed at some point.
Amidst the sounds of cracking and shattering, the ice wall crumbled, but it also caused I Know Someone to lose his balance and tumble to the ground.
Most of the shattered ice failed to penetrate his Dragon Scales. Only a handful managed to breach his defenses, leaving traces of blood in their wake.
Thanks to the Vampire's rapid regenerative abilities, the minor injuries swiftly began to heal.
I Know Someone saw no need to rise to his feet. As his light-gold eyes flickered, invisible waves radiated from him, enveloping the surroundings.
In her state of invisibility, Franca felt as though she was witnessing the most horrifying scene from the depths of a nightmare, recalling her past terrors. Her body trembled, and she abandoned the protection of her invisibility, appearing in the corridor of the asylum.
Awe!
This was a Psychiatrist's Awe, also referred to as Dragon Might or Mass Chaos. It had the power to instantly induce panic in a single target or all living beings within its range, plunging them into chaos.
Relying on Dragon Might to maintain control of the situation, I Know Someone agilely leaped up, intending to put some distance between himself and Franca as he sprinted down the corridor.
He refrained from attacking her at this moment because he understood that Demonesses possessed abilities like Mirror Substitution and Staff Substitution. Trying to kill her or cripple her combat abilities with a single strike would only delay his escape.
As he vaulted out of the shattered ice, I Know Someone caught a glimpse of the ward, now empty.
Lumian Lee appeared to have recovered from the effects of Frenzy and used teleportation to evade Awe's influence in the nick of time!
Just as this realization crossed I Know Someone's mind, he saw the male version of Aurore—Lumian—materialize in front of him.
Without hesitation, I Know Someone's golden eyes focused on Lumian, preparing to cast Awe once more.
In the next moment, Lumian's figure vanished again.
He had employed Spirit World Traversal twice in quick succession!
Almost simultaneously, I Know Someone's pupils dilated, and a shiver ran down his spine. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

This time, Lumian's destination was behind him.
It was akin to Blink!
Lumian's figure instantly materialized behind I Know Someone, witnessing a dense black fog emanating from the latter's body, an attempt to evade to the side of the corridor.
Too slow! Lumian harrumphed, sending two white beams of light shooting from his nostrils to encompass the area ahead.
I Know Someone couldn't evade and was struck by the white beams as he was thrown to the ground, tumbling twice.
Lumian breathed heavily, feeling drained as his head throbbed with pain.
Three consecutive "teleportations" and two rounds of using the Spell of Harrumph and other abilities had completely sapped his energy.
If it hadn't been for the substantial amount of Pyromaniac potion he had digested compared to when he hunted the padre, sustaining this level of expenditure would have been extremely challenging.
Franca, who had recovered from Awe, approached and shook her head in disapproval.
"No need for all that. It's not like you don't have assistance."
Why go all out when help was available?
Even if the Major Arcana card holders hadn't been lurking in the shadows, and even if I Know Someone had managed to escape the asylum, wouldn't he have left behind some blood that could be used for a curse?
Lumian didn't respond, making his way over to the unconscious form of I Know Someone.

Chapter 406: Inevitability-like Ending

Staring at the unconscious enemy in the corridor, Lumian refrained from an immediate attack. He squatted down in silence.

He retrieved a bottle of sedative obtained from the Bliss Society's Rentas, unscrewed the cap, and brought it to the patient's nose.

Franca glanced over and advised, "Remove the broken arrow from his chest first. Otherwise, I think his body can handle most of the sedative's effects."

The grayish-white stone-like scales on the Beyonder suspected to be I Know Someone slowly dissipated due to the unconsciousness in spirituality brought about by the Spell of Harrumph.

Lumian nodded and used the hand holding the bottle cap to carefully remove the obsidian arrow.

Franca breathed a sigh of relief and continued, "The question now is how do we confirm if this guy is the real I Know Someone.

"A powerful Hypnotist can manipulate a Beyonder of the same pathway and Sequence, altering their self-awareness and making them believe they are 'I Know Someone.' They can substitute the real deal to appear in all sorts of occasions, completing different pranks and fight any adversaries.

"F*ck, why does it seem more troublesome than dealing with a Marionettist!?"

What Franca meant was that the enemy in front of her might also be a victim, someone whose perceptions had been altered to make them believe they were "I Know Someone."

This possibility couldn't be ruled out, so she wasn't capable of steeling herself to kill him before channeling his spirit.

Furthermore, Lumian's remaining truth serum wouldn't work in this case. The hypnotized person would only tell what they believed to be true.

Lumian screwed the cap back onto the sedative bottle and thought for a moment before suggesting, "Let's set up a ritual and seek confirmation from Mr. Fool. Since Loki can use Celestial Worthy's help to locate members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society within a certain range, we can employ a similar method to activate the special aura on I Know Someone. If it's there, he's real. If not, he's fake."

"What if he's a member of the Research Society who was captured by Loki and I Know Someone? In the past, several people went missing without their deaths being confirmed, including some Psychiatrists." Franca began to suspect the source of I Know Someone's Beyonder characteristics that allowed him to advance to Sequence 7.

Research Society members they had hunted?
Lumian pondered for a moment and replied, "In that case, let Jenna in. She might still have some lingering good luck in this aspect. If she doesn't encounter anyone else, it proves that the unconscious one is I Know Someone.
"You're responsible for protecting Jenna..."
Before Lumian could finish, Madam Magician's voice echoed in his ears, "There's no need to go through so much trouble."
Crouching in front of the unconscious person, Lumian sensed the space around him come alive, contracting inward and swallowing the Beyonder suspected to be I Know Someone.
"Wow," Franca exclaimed, and Lumian slowly stood up.
The two of them waited patiently. In just 20 to 30 seconds, the Beyonder in the blue-and-white-striped hospital gown was ejected from the void.
Immediately after, they heard Madam Magician's response: "It's 'I Know Someone.'"
...
Beneath the crimson moon in the sky, the Delta Asylum loomed, its darkness even denser and curved into an eerie arc compared to the surrounding night.
On the rooftop of the three-story grayish-blue building, the shadowy Magician turned to her companion and said, "Apart from the lunatic, there are no hidden dangers or traps.
"Did I overreact and overestimate the situation?"
Justice, resembling a dream, replied calmly, "There's nothing wrong with your choice. It's never wrong no matter how much importance you attach to matters related to that Celestial Worthy.
"Only by paying enough attention each time can we avoid being suddenly deceived and falling into a true trap."
Magician nodded slightly, closed the notebook in her hand, and cast her gaze towards the third-floor corridor which wasn't in her line of sight.
...
Upon hearing Madam Magician's conclusion, Lumian let out a chuckle.
He put away the remaining half of the sedative and turned to Franca, saying, "We can let Jenna in now."
Franca nodded and disappeared into the shadows along the corridor.
Lumian looked down at the seemingly ordinary I Know Someone, his eyes deep and a sly smile on his lips.
The effects of the Spell of Harrumph should have worn off long ago, but the Bliss Society's sedative was still doing its job.

Considering I Know Someone's physique, this sedative wouldn't last much longer. However, Lumian was prepared for this moment.
At that very instant, the Delta Asylum was in chaos due to the fire and shouting. Particularly on the first floor, the commotion was intense. The duty doctor and a few burly guards patrolled the area to ensure that no tinder remnants remained.
Meanwhile, Jenna and Franca skillfully navigated through the shadows and ascended to the third floor.
Lumian took a sheepskin from Guillaume Bénet, the padre, and spread it on the ground.
He carefully wrapped I Know Someone in it.
After a brief contemplation, Lumian raised the obsidian arrow in his hand and plunged it into I Know Someone's left eye.
The excruciating pain jolted I Know Someone awake, and his left eye turned bloodshot.
Almost simultaneously, he heard a sinister chuckle.
"Sheep!"
Amidst the echoing Hermes words, I Know Someone, cocooned in the ritual sheepskin, was instantly engulfed by dark light, rendering him powerless.
When the dark light finally subsided, he had transformed into a grayish-white sheep.
Lumian withdrew the obsidian arrow from the crushed eyeball and swiftly plunged it into I Know Someone's right eye.
A blood-curdling scream echoed through the room as Lumian pulled out the arrow. He pressed down on the struggling "sheep" with one hand and stroked its head with the other, a sinister smile playing on his lips.
"Now, we can finally have a good chat."
While Lumian engaged in this whispering conversation, he tossed the obsidian arrow to Jenna.
Next, Lumian produced an ordinary bottle of wound medicine and meticulously applied it to I Know Someone's blood-colored eye socket. He wrapped the other party's eyes in layers of white bandages he had prepared.
Only then did I Know Someone, who had awakened from his coma and was enduring intense pain, regained some composure. He attempted to use his abilities, but to no avail.
Franca and Jenna watched Lumian intently as he continued to tend to the transformed sheep, I Know Someone, feeling a mix of curiosity and unease. Initially, Jenna had wanted to assist Lumian in extracting information or exacting revenge, but now, she felt that this scenario was enough.

She shifted her attention to the obsidian broken arrow in her hand but noticed no negative effects. She wondered if it was one of the mystical items Franca had mentioned before.
As Lumian retrieved a brownish-yellow twine he had prepared in advance and began to wrap it around the sheep's neck, the duty doctor, alerted by the sheep's bleating, arrived on the third floor with several burly guards.
Franca and Jenna swiftly concealed themselves in the shadows, while Lumian, disguised as Aurore, calmly turned and led the sheep to the end of the corridor.
Crimson flames erupted from Lumian's body, which had regained some of its spirituality, and blazed fiercely in the corridor.
The duty doctor and the guards dared not approach, witnessing a figure walking through the flames, heading to the end of the annex corridor.
The figure was also guiding a sheep. It resisted, unwilling to leave, but the rope around its neck forced it to move forward.
After being dragged on the ground for a while, the sheep, its neck tightening and its breathing becoming labored, finally stood up and followed.
By the time the flames in the corridor abruptly extinguished, sparing any damage to the adjacent rooms, the doctor on duty and the guards had lost all trace of the man and the sheep.
Am I hallucinating... The situation was so odd and unbelievable that these individuals shared the same thoughts.
Meanwhile, the charred corridor stood as evidence that a fire had indeed occurred, miraculously without harming anyone.
Leaving a guard to report the incident to the nearest police headquarters, the duty doctor returned to his office on the first floor in a bewildered state.
As he sank into his chair, he couldn't help but wonder, Could it be that the infernal being associated with fire has emerged from the abyss? *Is its signature to lead a sheep? Is this the embodiment of flames?*
His thoughts grew more fantastical with each passing moment, and he couldn't shake the feeling that he should have gone straight to the cathedral to consult the bishops and padres rather than involve the police.
Knock, knock, knock!
He heard a knock on the door.
The doctor on duty jolted in his chair. He straightened up and responded with a deep voice, "Come in, please."
As the door creaked open, the doctor's eyes froze.
It was the blond devil, accompanied by the sheep with its eyes

wrapped in white bandages, and its grayish-white face stained with blood.
"I need to trouble you with something," Lumian said calmly as he led I Know Someone into the doctor's office. "My sheep exhibits severe anti-human tendencies and extreme violence. I want to treat its mental illness."
How... Before he could formulate a response, the handsome blond devil inquired, "Do you know how to perform a lobotomy?"
"Yes, a little," the doctor on duty replied subconsciously. "But it's a sheep..."
Could the brain structure be the same?
As he contemplated this, he watched the sheep struggle frantically in its bindings, unable to escape.
Lumian chuckled.
"It doesn't matter. We can give it a try. It's just a sheep. If it dies, so be it. We can still roast it."
With that, he dragged the unruly sheep toward a nearby treatment table, using his hands and feet to pin it down.
If the patient had been human, the doctor, lacking experience and prohibited from performing a lobotomy, would never have dared to attempt it. However, because it was a sheep, he had no reservations.
In an effort to avoid antagonizing the arsonist devil and cooperate while awaiting the arrival of the police, the doctor on duty cautiously approached the treatment table.
He said hesitantly, "I need an ice pick."
His intention was to create an excuse to go to the ice warehouse and distance himself from the arsonist devil. However, just as he finished speaking, a hand emerged from the shadows, offering him a sharp icicle.
W-what's going on... In his shock, the doctor vaguely heard the words, "No need to thank me."
Numbly, he accepted the thin icicle and unwrapped the white bandage covering the sheep's head.
The sheep's struggle intensified.
Assessing the damage to its eye sockets, the doctor on duty inserted the thin, sharp icicle through the crack and carefully manipulated it, stirring its brain's frontal lobe.
After a few moments of struggle, the grayish-white sheep abruptly fell silent.

Chapter 407: Reward for Good Luck

After the surgery, the blind sheep stepped off the treatment table, calm and docile, no longer resisting. The duty doctor felt like he was in a dream.

The operation was a success...

The surgical technique designed for humans had actually worked on a sheep...

The doctor watched in a daze as the arsonist devil guided the blind sheep—now cured of its mental illness—out of the room and disappeared into the crimson moonlit night.

Wherever they went, crimson flames ignited the white bandages and barely visible fur.

In the blazing flames, black fire flowed like a river, "cleansing" away the remaining icicles, footprints, and any other traces.

The doctor felt no immediate danger and watched in a daze, as if enjoying a spectacular fireworks show.

After an unknown amount of time, all the flames subsided. The guard who had been dispatched returned to the Delta Asylum with a group of black-uniformed police officers.

"Why did it take you so long?" the doctor blurted out instinctively.

The leading officer cursed angrily, "Son of a bitch, we were ambushed in the shadows on the way here. Someone was shooting at us from the darkness!"

...

In Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, in the market district.

After securing I Know Someone to one of the dining table's sturdy legs, Lumian paid the sheep no mind. He lay on the sofa in the living room and pretended to be asleep.

His appearance had been altered back by Lie, and the Decency brooch had long been taken off.

Franca glanced at the sheep, which stood silently and didn't attempt to escape with the dining table, and asked, "Aren't we going to interrogate him now?"

She avoided looking at Lumian because he had become so irritating that she felt like punching him. Even the sheep, now a pacifist, was eager to do the same.

Lumian's voice remained calm as he replied, "I'll question him once I've regained my spirituality."

That makes sense. It's safer this way. After all, I Know Someone is now a sheep with his frontal lobe removed. He can't use his abilities or put up resistance... Franca, dressed in an Assassin suit, averted her gaze and headed to her bedroom to avoid losing

control of her hands, black flames, frost, or spider silk.
She wasn't worried that any accidents might occur prior to the interrogation, leading to I Know Someone's bizarre death or him turning into a monster due to losing control. Madam Magician and the Major Arcana card holder had already confirmed I Know Someone's identity. They must have seized the opportunity to obtain the most important information.
Jenna, holding the broken obsidian arrow, approached the divan with a warped expression.
"Your trophy."
She offered the obsidian arrow to Lumian, who hadn't yet closed his eyes.
During this exchange, her right hand trembled slightly, as if she wanted to thrust the arrow into the other party's eye.
Lumian didn't take it and calmly said, "This is your reward for your good luck.
"Or rather, this is your true stroke of luck."
Why does he sound like a circus fortune-teller... Jenna didn't refuse. After mumbling to herself, she quickly turned around and entered Franca's bedroom.
It had to be said that after her companion advanced to Demoness of Pleasure, even as a woman, she would blush and feel her ears heat up when she saw her change her clothes.
After changing into comfortable home clothes, Franca used Magic Mirror Divination to get a rough understanding of the name, abilities, and negative effects of the obsidian arrow.
"Name: Arrow of the Bloodthirsty.
"Ability: Plunge it into the chest where the heart and let it absorb blood. The user will gain potent self-healing and regeneration abilities, along with exceptional physical attributes. Whether it's speed, agility, the ability to communicate with animals, vision, smell, or hearing, they will all be greatly enhanced. Their charisma will also receive a significant boost.
"In addition, the user will gain Dark domain spell-like abilities such as Abyss Shackles, Claw of Corrosion, and Wings of Darkness.
"Negative effects:
"While in use, you will despise sunlight and crave blood.
"Your blood will be continuously drained by the item until you succumb to excessive blood loss. You must constantly monitor your condition and remove the broken arrow in time.
"The more you use it, the more likely it is to cause subtle changes in your body. If these accumulate beyond a limit, it might even lead to bodily collapse. Note: Try not to use it for more than three minutes at a time. It's best to use it with intervals of more than

three days. This way, your body will have a chance to recover and prevent any mutations.
"Avoid using it during a full moon. While it can enhance your condition, it can also easily lead to illusions and danger."
"Not a bad mystical item," Franca praised sincerely as she handed the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty back to Jenna. "Carrying it doesn't have any negative effects. Such a mystical item could fetch over 40,000 verl d'or at various mysticism gatherings."
Holding the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty, Jenna pondered and said, "If I give it to you, will that settle the debt I owe you?"
She believed she owed Franca 30,000 verl d'or.
Franca chuckled.
"Don't worry. This Arrow of the Bloodthirsty can significantly boost your strength, providing you with true self-preservation abilities. You can sell it later once your Sequence has advanced to the point where it's no longer useful.
"Take your time paying back the money you owe me. There's no rush."
Jenna fell silent for a few moments before nodding in agreement.
...
Lumian slept until 6 a.m., feeling refreshed but still with a slight throbbing in his head.
As he sat up and looked around, he noticed that the sheep I Know Someone had transformed into was standing quietly by the dining table, its empty eye sockets filled with dried blood.
Lumian chuckled.
"Your resilience is impressive. Such severe injuries and basic treatment didn't do you in."
He led the sheep into the living room and poured the remaining truth serum into its mouth.
With that task completed, Lumian recited an incantation in Hermes.
"His Grace."
A dark light flashed, and the grayish-white sheepskin split open, revealing I Know Someone's body in a blue-and-white-striped hospital gown.
Lumian guided him to a chair and had him sit down. Staring into his empty blood-red eye sockets, he smiled and sighed.
"As I mentioned yesterday, we can finally have a good chat."
The calm I Know Someone remained silent.
Lumian retreated to the sofa and sat down. He patiently waited for the truth serum to take effect before asking, "What's your name, what was your original occupation, and why were you in the Delta Asylum?"

He began with the simplest questions, using the truth serum to guide the other's instinctive responses.
I Know Someone's voice was unremarkable, yet strangely compelling.
"My name is Pierre Theuriau. I was originally one of the deputy editors of Basic Medicine.
"I once mentioned that I know someone who ended up in an asylum due to negligence and overconfidence. Well, that someone was me. I was obsessed with manipulating the minds of others and didn't pay enough attention to my own issues. One day, I just lost my mind.
"When I finally regained consciousness, I found myself in the Delta Asylum. Fortunately, I was only mentally unstable and didn't completely lose control. I still had some sense of self-preservation and didn't unleash my Beyonder powers recklessly. If I had, they would have sent me to the Inquisition."
The person you mentioned is indeed yourself... After discovering that "I Know Someone" was hiding in the asylum, Lumian gained a new understanding of what he had said back then.
He pressed further, "Now that you've regained your consciousness and the ability to think, why do you choose to remain in the Delta Asylum?"
I Know Someone didn't show any mockery or amusement. He answered calmly, "I find the asylum fascinating. The thought patterns, mental states, and mental constructs of the patients here are significantly different from those of ordinary people. They deserve observation, research, and analysis.
"Moreover, some of them have gone mad due to illness, while others have become mentally unstable due to other factors. The latter group includes individuals who have come into contact with the mysterious and abnormal."
"Including the one that posed as you?" Lumian asked, seeking confirmation.
I Know Someone nodded slowly.
"Yes, he's quite special. I've been observing him for a long time. He's like a philosopher, constantly posing unusual questions. Patients close to him, nurses who care for him, and even doctors who treat him have gradually shifted toward his mental state. There were also guardians with hidden supernatural abilities lurking around him.
"We dealt with the guardians and worked to gain his trust. Everything went smoothly. We learned that they are part of an organization called the Entry Persons and practice a secretive ritual known as Midoro's Worship. It allows one's Astral Projection

to ascend to various heavenly domains and witness extraordinary phenomena. They can touch the fringes of immortality and gain knowledge and corresponding abilities, enabling them to undergo a fundamental transformation behind the formless door."

Entry Persons... Formless door... Lumian memorized the information and continued asking,

"After Loki's resurrection and his given warning, why didn't you immediately flee Trier?"

I Know Someone's response lacked any emotion as he said, "How lame would that be? We'd have to eliminate a few pursuers before making our escape."

So that's the reason... Lumian thought there must be something significant that had kept I Know Someone in Trier.

"Then why didn't you go into hiding somewhere else?"

I Know Someone replied calmly,"I want to witness the despair and suffering of those chasing me."

Using my life for amusement... Lumian couldn't help but chuckle.

"Do you not realize the strength of the Tarot Club?"

I Know Someone pondered for a moment and then said, "The secret organization that uses tarot cards as their code names? What do they have to do with you?"

Upon hearing this, Lumian burst into laughter as he bent over, his amusement clearly exaggerated.

Chapter 408: Motive

Amidst exaggerated laughter, the doors of the two bedrooms creaked open.

Franca and Jenna appeared at the door, casting puzzled glances at Lumian.

"What's so funny?" Franca muttered as she approached.

How could he interrogate a criminal to get a reaction akin to watching a comedy performance?

Lumian stopped laughing and remarked, "Ignorance can lead to many dangers, as can arrogance. And having ignorance and arrogance makes it almost irredeemable."

Observing this, Jenna retreated to the bedroom and closed the door.

She knew there were certain matters between Ciel and Franca that were best left unknown to her.

"Why? Is this guy really ignorant and arrogant?" Franca used her right hand to quickly tidy her disheveled hair after waking up.

She settled into the recliner and fixed her gaze on I Know Someone, who remained composed and emotionless.

Lumian recounted how I Know Someone found it pointless to simply escape and insisted on seeking some amusement. He also mentioned his ignorance regarding the pursuer's connection to the Tarot Club.

Franca was left speechless.

She couldn't decide if this core member of April Fool's was highly professional and committed to his principles or simply arrogant and ignorant.

After a few moments, Franca glanced back at the guest bedroom door.

"Jenna is getting more involved in our affairs. Sooner or later, she would uncover our true faiths and the secret organization supporting us..."

Lumian said nonchalantly,"It's simple. Mr. Fool is an officially recognized orthodox god. In a few days, take Jenna to Lavigny Docks and reveal who we truly worship and whose blessings we receive. Ask her if she wants to secretly convert to Mr. Fool. If she declines, that's okay too."

"Okay." Franca nodded solemnly.

Lumian refocused his attention on I Know Someone, who remained remarkably composed, and he redirected the conversation.

"Why were the lot of you targeting Aurore, Muggle?"

I Know Someone seemed to be discussing something unrelated to

himself.
"Because many members of the Research Society were praising her, we decided to embarrass her."
"What kind of logic is that?" Franca blurted out. "You want to tease people when they are praised?"
I Know Someone nodded gently.
"Breaking the idealized image in the minds of many people is part of the spirit of pranks. Their reactions bring us immense satisfaction."
Franca's face flushed with anger. She wanted to unleash a tirade but restrained herself due to her lacking vocabulary.
She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.
"So, do you even remember what happiness and joy are? Do you still experience these emotions?"
Lumian let out a long sigh and asked,"And then?"
I Know Someone wore a nostalgic expression.
"Capitalizing on Muggle's visit to our team to trade, I occasionally offered her helpful advice. She began to trust me more, even sharing her concerns with me as a psychiatrist seeking solutions.
"During that time, I played the role of a credible source, all while collecting enough information and planning a massive prank. Eventually, I discovered that the body Muggle inhabited following her transmigration belonged to a girl who believed in a evil deity of Inevitability. Furthermore, she realized that her family, including her father, mother, brothers, and sister, displayed odd behaviors. There were numerous unsettling details upon closer examination, enough to induce fear in anyone who delved too deep. So, she found an opportunity to escape from home.
"This situation bore a striking resemblance to a family I knew, with a female member who had mysteriously vanished.
"After careful comparisons, Loki, the family, and I confirmed that Muggle was indeed their missing relative. Then, one day, Loki provided the family's modified Soul Summoning Spell and instructed me to find a way to sell it to Muggle for her use.
"Drawing on my understanding of Muggle's psychological and emotional state, I meticulously crafted a persuasive argument. Leveraging her longing to return home and her habit of searching for clues, I convinced Mad Lady to sell the Soul Summoning Spell to her.
"As expected, she began to suffer from schizophrenia. In a sense, Roche Louise Sanson came back to life.
"In each subsequent treatment session, I made her appear better on the surface, but her condition deteriorated with each passing session. At times, I even guided Roche's personality to emerge and

engage with her. It was quite intriguing."
Lumian listened in silence, refraining from interrupting I Know Someone's account with anger. Franca, on the other hand, was seething with anger, repeatedly sipping water to calm herself.
Why are these people so detestable!
They didn't regard others as real people at all!
After I Know Someone had finished speaking, Lumian inquired further.
"The Soul Summoning Spell comes from Roche Louise Sanson's family?"
"That's correct." I Know Someone's condition was akin to a windless lake. "They combined the knowledge obtained from a boon and a Warlock's Soul Summoning Spell, giving rise to the Soul Summoning Spell that Muggle purchased. I'm not sure what makes it special; I'm not a scholar of witchcraft."
Knowledge from a boon... Lumian quickly reviewed his knowledge of Dancer, Alms Monk, and Contractee within the Inevitability pathway, but he found nothing that could be connected to the Soul Summoning Spell.
He suspected that it might be a knowledge linked to a higher Sequence of the Inevitability pathway or perhaps a unique boon bestowed by the evil god known as Inevitability.
After a few moments of contemplation, Lumian asked slowly, "Does Roche Louise Sanson's family know about Muggle's existence and her condition? Are they aware of her true identity and her current location?"
I Know Someone nodded.
"I informed them of the first part, and Roche herself disclosed the rest. Later, they managed to establish contact with Muggle, bypassing both me and Loki."
The Sinners is involved in spreading the Inevitability faith in Cordu and providing various resources... That's correct. The padre could have joined them immediately after leaving Cordu and become their so-called archbishop. This indirectly confirms it... Lumian's emotions remained subdued, but his mind was sharp.
He subconsciously clenched his fists and focused on I Know Someone.
"What are the names of the members of Roche Louise Sanson's family? Where are they currently residing? Are they affiliated with a secret organization or a cult?"
I Know Someone shook his head.
"After I moved into the asylum, I lost contact with them. During this period, I attempted to locate them but discovered that they had already relocated. It seemed they were no longer using their

original identities, as if they were trying to hide from something.
"Roche's father's name is Voisin, her mother's name is Constace, her elder brother's name is Bliss, her elder sister's name is Annette, and her younger brother's name is Atur. They are all part of a branch of the Sanson family. However, I do not know their current names.
"Voisin was once a struggling merchant on the brink of bankruptcy, but he later joined a secret organization known as the Sinners. Miraculously, he escaped his financial woes and regained his success. He had numerous businesses, with the most notable being the Voisin Café, that doubled up as a hotel, restaurant, and various functions. It was frequented by high society, but before they relocated, these businesses were sold."
Lumian proceeded to gather more information about the Sinners and sought details about the appearance, mannerisms, and habits of each family member.
With the newly acquired information in hand, Lumian spoke thoughtfully, "Do you know what role the Sinners' demigod or Beyonder at a higher Sequence played in the Cordu disaster?"
I Know Someone replied,"Not long before I moved into the asylum, Voisin informed me that they were taken by surprise. This occurred much earlier than the agreed-upon time, so none of them had arrived at the scene.
"It appears that some individuals were overly eager to obtain the boons. The ensuing mishap resulting from their failure also caused them to lose many leads. Otherwise, they would have discovered you much earlier."
The Sufferer lurking in the shadows of Cordu and around me isn't the demigod of the Sinners, so who is interfering with my fate with Termiboros? Lumian frowned and asked, "Did Roche not inform the Sinners, her parents, or her siblings about the early ritual?"
"No," I Know Someone replied succinctly. "They believe she wished to reduce the number of individuals receiving the boons and concentrate the power."
Lumian fell into a contemplative silence, sensing that something was amiss.
Could the lizard-like elf be involved?
It had prevented Aurore from seeking Madame Hela's help and Roche Louise Sanson from contacting the Sinners?
Lumian attempted to inquire further about this matter but did not receive additional information.
Wary of the truth serum's effects wearing off, he decided to change the subject.

"What does the deity you believe in want you to do in Trier?"
I Know Someone's vacant eyes remained fixed on the sofa as he responded, "He occasionally grants us revelations for us to decipher independently.
"If we interpret them correctly and complete the corresponding task, we receive something unexpected.
"Apart from these revelations, He rarely communicates with us directly. We can only pray to Him through a ritual, and this can be done no more than once a week."
The Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings and Mr. Fool's state are very similar... Lumian was tempted to inquire about the revelations granted by the Celestial Worthy but decided it might be too risky to discuss.
After a brief moment of consideration and deliberation, he decided to approach it from another angle and indirectly inquire.
"Did you start the rumors about human blood bread?"
"Yes," I Know Someone admitted without hesitation.
Lumian continued, "What about the rumor that Mandrake can treat illnesses?"
I Know Someone calmly replied, "I was the one behind that as well.
"It was a revelation from the Celestial Worthy. It was then that I realized I could influence events this way. After some time, rumors of human blood bread began to spread."
The Mandrake rumor is a revelation from the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings? Will there be any hidden dangers in using it to suppress the spirituality surge? Lumian contemplated the idea of warning the naive Vampire, La Nou Bruch.
He circled around and inquired about other revelations about the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings. He didn't obtain much useful information, so he could only move on to the last topic.
"Tell me about Mad Lady, Ultraman, Hisoka, Loki, and Bard."

Chapter 409: Fire Execution

I Know Someone said calmly, "Mad Lady is probably a Traveler. I have no idea where she lives...

"Ultraman used to be a Sequence 6 Notary of the Sun pathway. I'm not sure anymore. He hasn't been to Trier recently, and I haven't left the asylum. We only exchange a few words at each gathering...

"Loki is a Sequence 5 Marionettist of the Seer pathway, but I suspect he wields more power from Celestial Worthy than us. He can access resources unknown to us. He even owns a mysterious ancient castle, Dylan, hidden somewhere...

"Bard is a Sequence 6 Prometheus of the Marauder pathway. Of course, I'm unsure of his current situation. We haven't seen each other in reality for a long time... He did write Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles and published it under someone else's name...

"I'm not familiar with Hisoka. He hasn't attended any real-life gatherings in the Northern Continent. In my opinion, he's very dangerous, second only to Loki. He's similar to Mad Lady...

"If I hadn't gone crazy for a while, I would be a Sequence 5 by now..."

Castle Dylan... Lumian recalled Madame Hela's description of Loki's dream and suspected that the mysterious ancient castle hidden somewhere was where Loki had been resurrected.

He hadn't expected Bard to be a Beyonder of the Marauder pathway. He believed that the nickname originated from the Ocean Songster of the Sailor pathway or the Midnight Poet of the Evernight pathway, but on second thought, it made sense. In rural stories, bards often moonlighted as thieves.

This also confirmed the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings's influence on the Seer, Apprentice, and Marauder pathways. Half of the six core members belonged to these three pathways.

After I Know Someone finished speaking, Franca asked with concern, "Who else in the Research Society is involved with this?"

I Know Someone couldn't resist keeping it a secret. He replied calmly, "I know Pettigrew is one..."

"Pettigrew?" Franca blurted out in surprise. "I thought he was making fun of his height with that nickname, but it turns out he's mocking his identity?"

I Know Someone nodded gently.

"Before finding the organization and joining the Research Society, he already knew Loki. As you all know, Loki can use the Celestial Worthy's power to sense transmigrators within a certain range, and Pettigrew is also in the Trier Greater Region.

"He first became Loki's subordinate before joining the Research Society. He was assigned to another team. He actually nicknamed himself Pettigrew because he wanted to play a prank and reveal the truth. He mocked and fooled all the Research Society members who lacked insight, but in reality, I knew he was hesitating, feeling guilty, and struggling. He hoped to use this method to warn the other Research Society members that there was something wrong with him.

"My plan was to find an opportunity to tell him that Muggle, who never discriminated against his height and was gentle and amiable to him, was harmed by us. He could be considered an indirect helper. When the time comes, his devastation and pained expression would have been very interesting."

"Dammit!" Franca cursed.

Although I Know Someone had been lobotomized and he had become very calm, his tone no longer mocking, his straightforward thoughts were still filled with vileness, making Franca unable to control her emotions.

"What else?" Lumian asked on her behalf.

I Know Someone recited five more aliases in a row before concluding, "These are the few I know. As for the ones Loki and the others secretly developed or didn't tell me, I'm not sure."

"There's quite a few..." Franca was filled with hatred and frustration.

Lumian turned to her and said, "Just share this information with Madame Hela. How they handle it is up to the president and vice presidents. You don't need to be troubled or hesitant. Just enjoy the fruits of your labor. Isn't there a saying back at Aurore, uh, your home? If you don't witness the lamb being killed and don't cook it yourself, you can enjoy the delicious mutton without it weighing on you. Otherwise, it's inevitable that you'll be benevolent, soft-hearted, and conflicted."

Franca exhaled and muttered, "Your sister's adaptation of famous quotes is ridiculous..."

She gathered her composure and looked at I Know Someone.

"Did you spread news of the impending apocalypse because you believed in the Celestial Worthy and rushed to pursue joy, allowing you to commit all sorts of evil deeds without feeling guilty? Or did you become desperate and believe in the Celestial Worthy because you were certain that the apocalypse was about to arrive and humans couldn't resist?"

I Know Someone replied,"Both. Some tried to replicate their pre-transmigration actions and immediately gained the Celestial Worthy's attention, while others faced catastrophes and learned

about the apocalypse. They only believed in the Celestial Worthy after their mental breakdown."
At this point, I Know Someone's empty eye sockets turned to Franca, who had just asked the question.
"Later, the Celestial Worthy even gave us some revelations, allowing us to guess a portion of the truth, including..."
For some inexplicable reason, Lumian suddenly felt a strong sense of danger and interrupted I Know Someone's statement.
"You don't have to continue!"
I Know Someone immediately closed his mouth.
"Why can't he say it?" Franca eagerly awaited the answer, but there was no response.
Lumian recalled concepts like the "barrier" related to the apocalypse and said seriously, "It's not suitable for you to know the truth about the apocalypse yet. That knowledge might cause you to lose control or be fatally corrupted on the spot. You can inquire about it when you become a demigod."
"Alright." Franca glanced at Lumian and muttered, "Why do you act like you know the truth..."
Why can he do it, but I can't?
"I only know a little," Lumian replied candidly. "And that knowledge brought me danger. It's all thanks to Mr. Fool's seal."
As the effects of the truth serum wore off, I Know Someone returned to his usual unchanging calm. Even his willingness to answer questions had vanished.
Franca gazed at the lobotomized Psychiatrist for a few seconds before sighing.
"Sometimes, we're still too naive. We might even think of ourselves as the protagonist."
Lumian knew that "we" referred to the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.
Franca averted her gaze and turned to Lumian.
"While the sheep was undergoing the operation, I searched both I Know Someone's and his substitute's wards. I found some papers at the latter's place. I didn't read the content carefully, but it felt a little esoteric."
As she spoke, she rose and returned to her room, retrieving a thin stack of papers.
Lumian flipped through them and frowned.
"Midoro's Worship..."
"What's this?" Franca hadn't heard the first half of the interrogation.
Lumian explained briefly and concluded, "This should be a spell that allows one to traverse the Formless Door and closely align

with an evil god, gaining knowledge and experience. Even ordinary people should be able to learn it after receiving proper guidance."
Franca sighed from the bottom of her heart and said, "No wonder it sounds so sinister. The layers of the heavenly domains, the Formless Door, the extraordinary phenomena, and the fringes of immortality. It sounds very dangerous!"
Lumian put away the secret deed spell, Midoro's Worship. Although he didn't know how to use it, nor did he need to, he could still grasp the corresponding knowledge. This would help him deal with the heretics who relied on Midoro's Worship to obtain knowledge and strength.
He then said to Franca, "Relay this information to Madame Hela. I'll handle I Know Someone."
"Alright." Franca nodded gently and watched as Lumian put on the Lie earring and walked to the armchair. He grabbed the calm man's shoulder and instantly vanished.
...
Prison district, Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground.
It was not yet 7 a.m., and there was no one here. It was wet, as if isolated from the world.
Lumian emerged from the void with I Know Someone and tied the April Fool's core member to the stake.
Then, he retreated a long distance, crouched down, and pressed his hands to the ground.
Two crimson tongues of fire swiftly darted towards I Know Someone's body along the weed-covered ground.
They grew larger and larger until they transformed into a giant serpent, engulfing I Know Someone completely.
Lumian stood up and used his feet to maintain the flow of flames. He silently watched as the calm Psychiatrist revealed grayish-white Dragon Scales under the stress.
His body subconsciously struggled, but it wasn't as intense. His various Beyonder powers scattered in all directions, but they failed to affect Lumian who stood beyond their range.
Lumian condensed a dangerous flaming spear and hurled it, piercing and burning a hole around I Know Someone's chest and abdomen.
The crimson flames that hadn't incinerated the Dragon Scales elsewhere surged into I Know Someone's body.
As Lumian watched the April Fool's core member truly begin to burn, his body instinctively emitting pained cries, his thoughts raced. He quickly recalled the battle last night and today's interrogation.
He had learned a lot from this, but he couldn't quite grasp the

acting principle.
Flames aren't just lethal; they can also be used as deterrence, intimidation, and a signal...
It is necessary for Pyromaniacs to combine their flames with traps...
...
As the raging flames engulfed I Know Someone, Lumian felt as if a fire was burning in his heart.
It was anger, satisfaction, and catharsis.
At that moment, Lumian's Pyromaniac potion digested a little more, just as it had after the battle the previous night.
After an unknown period of time, in the uninhabited execution ground, I Know Someone ceased his struggles and lost his breath. His body was charred as it cracked apart.

Chapter 410: A Leisure Week

In the drizzling execution ground, Lumian watched as the crimson flames gradually dwindled before his eyes. He observed as translucent, colorless mucus seeped out of the corpse. It surrounded the charred and cracked I Know Someone, attempting to burrow into his head through the empty eye sockets and fuse with some organ.

Crimson Fire Ravens materialized around Lumian, darting through the remaining blood-red eyes before the slime could reach its destination.

Rumble!

I Know Someone's head exploded from the inside out, splattering grayish-white colloids everywhere.

The transparent, colorless mucus had lost its binding substance, leaving it only able to condense independently, eventually forming a sticky colloid.

This colloid landed beneath the stake. From a distance, it resembled an unfixed mirror, capable of reflecting everything around it.

Lumian strode over and retrieved the colorless colloid, which was likely a Hypnotist Beyonder characteristic. He did this amidst the scorching air and the flames that flowed around him.

As he gazed upon it, he noticed minuscule transparent bubbles deep within the colloid. They caught and refracted sunlight from various angles, displaying an array of colors.

After storing away the Beyonder characteristic, Lumian turned on his heel and departed from the stake.

Behind him, the lingering flames continued their relentless assault, devouring the charred corpse.

As the light flickered, Lumian's figure vanished from the Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground.

...

In Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, in the market district.

Lumian, who had reverted to his original form with the Lie earring, rubbed his temples and turned to Franca.

"It's already taken care of. It's fitting for someone like him to meet his end at the stake."

"Unfortunately, he's a believer in the Celestial Worthy. Even if he doesn't take action, he remains a hidden threat—a potential time bomb. Otherwise, I would have spared him, albeit with his frontal lobe removed and his sight forever gone."

Franca breathed a sigh of relief. "That's reassuring."

In truth, she felt a twinge of regret. If not for the insanity that had gripped I Know Someone in the past and his faith in the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings, who was suspected of triggering their transmigration, she might have attempted to channel his spirit and inquire about the potion formula for the Spectator pathway, from Sequence 9 down to Sequence 6 or even Sequence 5. However, after thorough contemplation, she decided to forsake this perilous scheme.

Lumian's gaze shifted to the open door of the guest bedroom.

"Where's Jenna?"

"She's gone to the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons," Franca taunted Lumian. "She's much more diligent than you in digesting the potion."

Lumian replied thoughtfully, "After venting the flames within me to battle and carry out the execution, my Pyromaniac potion has significantly digested. At this rate, if I can distill a new acting principle, it should be fully digested within two months."

He didn't dwell on the subject and continued, "I intend to share I Know Someone's Beyonder characteristics with Madam Magician. Without her and the Tarot Club's support, we might have lost track of our target or lost control during our initial assault."

"No problem," Franca replied without hesitation. "The Beyonder characteristics of these followers of the evil god have eluded the grasp of high-ranking individuals. I wouldn't dare to possess them myself. There's no need to think about repaying me. Dealing with I Know Someone is also a mandate from the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society."

Lumian didn't stand on ceremony. He observed as Franca returned to the bedroom, changing into a white lace-adorned shirt and slim beige pants, seemingly preparing to go out.

"Where are you off to?" Lumian asked casually.

Franca responded with a hint of annoyance, "I've been caught up in all sorts of messes you've stirred up lately, and I haven't had a moment to pleasure myself. Now that it's finally settled, it's only fair that I take a break, right? I suggest you behave yourself for the next few days!"

Lumian couldn't help but smile as the Demoness of Pleasure slipped on her boots, swung the door open, and left.

Once the door slammed shut, Lumian, who had originally planned to return to Auberge du Coq Doré to write to Madam Magician, grabbed a pen and paper from the nearby table. He meticulously jotted down all the information I Know Someone had given him.

He then neatly folded the paper and placed I Know Someone's Hypnotist Beyonder characteristic on top of it.

Summoning the "doll" messenger, Lumian patiently waited.
Before long, the "doll" messenger returned, carrying the translucent colloid and a square piece of folded paper.
Madam Magician's reply read:
"This is a shared mission of the Tarot Club. There's no need for a reward. Keep it for yourself. I've already removed the corruption that could be removed.
"We'll mobilize various resources to search for the whereabouts of the remaining five April Fool's members, but we currently lack a solid lead. The pranks mentioned in the information have been ongoing for too long."
Lumian finished reading in silence, allowing the crimson flames to consume the paper in his hand.
He longed to teleport directly to Feynapotter's Gaia Province and the Southern Continent's West Balam to personally hunt down the suspicious April Fool's team members, such as Bard. However, he knew it was futile. Without sufficient information or clues, it was like searching for a needle in a haystack.
He couldn't rely on the ice-cream-eating boy's luck every time, could he?
All I can do now is wait for the Tarot Club to uncover useful leads... The only person I can track down at the moment is the publisher of the underground book, Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles. If only they had met with the real author, Bard... Lumian felt a mixture of disappointment and relief.
He planned to take his time with the Hypnotist Beyonder characteristic. While he searched for a suitable Artisan, he waited for Anthony Reid to investigate General Philip's widow.
If the Psychiatrist gained something and succeeded in curing his psychological issues, Lumian wouldn't mind selling him the Hypnotist Beyonder characteristics and splitting the proceeds with Franca.
If Lumian found a suitable Artisan before that, he would designate the mystical item he crafted as a common resource, allowing Franca, Jenna, and the others to use it as they saw fit.
After tucking away the Hypnotist Beyonder characteristic in a concealed pocket, Lumian exhaled and leaned back in his dining chair.
Only then did he hear the growl of his stomach and realize his hunger.
Since waking up at 6 a.m., he had been engrossed in the interrogation, execution, and letter writing, completely forgetting about breakfast.
Honestly, leaving me alone here; it's as if I live here... Lumian

mumbled to himself as he got up and ventured into the apartment's kitchen to see what ingredients were available.
Scanning the area, he spotted a few potatoes.
Lumian was momentarily surprised but quickly rolled up his sleeves and grabbed an apron hanging nearby. With skillful hands, he peeled, washed, and thinly sliced the potatoes into fine strips.
Following the process, he ignited the stove, heated a pan, added oil, sautéed, and tossed in the shredded potatoes. He seasoned the dish accordingly.
Once it was ready, Lumian toasted two slices of bread and poured a glass of milk.
Sitting down at the dining table, he sandwiched the crispy shredded potatoes between the slices of toast and savored them, occasionally taking a sip of milk.
Outside the window, the drizzle had cleared, and the sun beamed brightly.
...
During the following week, Lumian made the most of his time. He patiently awaited the recovery of his mental damage from the past two battles, taking the opportunity to act as a Pyromaniac and gradually digest the potion.
In the midst of this process, he also managed to report to Mr. K about his recent activities and the discovery of the evil god organization.
Members of the Savoie Mob in Salle de Bal Brise were surprised. Their boss had unexpectedly appeared for five to six consecutive days and had stayed for extended periods each time. Compared to their previous experiences of him being unavailable, it was as if he had found a double.
Charlie was equally astounded. Ciel frequented the basement bar every night to drink, tease, and taunt people, making him the prime target of this unusual dedication.
Just as Franca was about to revisit Trocadéro's Red House café and discreetly remind Browns Sauron not to forget auditing her, Hela's pure silver skull sent out a notice of a special gathering to Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches and Lumian's abandoned safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches.
It had been a while since Lumian had visited the safe house. If Franca hadn't inquired about the letter upon receiving it, he might not have been aware of it.
Many members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society operated in a similar fashion. They had designated locations for receiving and sending letters but did not actually reside there. They only visited periodically to avoid detection by Hela,

finding comfort in these small details.
Lumian arrived at the abandoned safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches and carefully unfolded the letter. Its contents read:
"Muggle:
"There's a special gathering scheduled for 10 tonight. We need to discuss something of utmost importance that concerns everyone's safety."
...
At night, just three minutes shy of ten o'clock, Lumian recited the incantation imbued with Concealment powers within the confines of the safe house on Rue du Rossignol.
Gradually, he felt himself sinking into a profound slumber, the sensation akin to his body being erased by an enormous eraser.
After an indeterminate period, he suddenly regained consciousness and found himself standing amidst an ancient palace enveloped in the misty shroud of a town.
Over a hundred members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society had already assembled, their figures still taking shape.
Navigating through what resembled a grand masquerade ball venue, Lumian, now transformed into Aurore using Lie, wore a Warlock's black robe and half-mask as he approached the Academy team.
He scanned the area but didn't spot the member known as Pettigrew.
Standing beside a slender man with a brownish-yellow manila document bag obscuring his head was Professor, adorned in a black butterfly mask, a bow tie shirt, and a long dark coat.
It was her husband, Associate Professor.
Professor regarded Lumian with curiosity and inquired, "Do you know what's happening? Why did they convene this special gathering?"
Lumian, taking on the persona of "Muggle" Aurore, smirked and let out a sigh.
"Because we have traitors among us."
"Traitors..." Professor and the other members of the Academy team echoed the term.
At that moment, the half-giant president, Gandalf, attired in a simple robe and hood, and the vice president, Hela, who appeared as a black widow with her face concealed by a veil, made their way to the massive stone throne situated deep within the ancient palace.

Chapter 411: Review Committee

The notice had already made it clear that this was no ordinary gathering. Most members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society didn't split into groups to chat. Instead, they took their customary positions and fixed their eyes on the massive mottled stone chair.

Ten minutes past the agreed time, Gandalf, the president in his linen robe, looked around and spoke in a booming voice, "Everyone, I've brought you here for something crucial.

"We've got a bunch of traitors among us!"

A bunch of traitors... Even though Professor and the others from the Academy had received Lumian's hint, they hadn't expected the issue to be this severe.

It wasn't just one traitor; it was a whole bunch!

The ancient palace, though dilapidated, exploded with commotion. Some members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society were skeptical, while others became instantly wary, suspicious of everyone around. Some thought there might be a problem, but they didn't think it was as bad as Gandalf made it out to be.

As they whispered amongst themselves, Hela, her face shrouded in black, spoke with an icy tone, "First, let's have one of the victims share her experience."

Her voice wasn't loud, but it cut through the silence of the night, reaching every member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

She then turned her gaze toward the area where the Academy team was positioned.

Understanding Hela's intent, Lumian confidently ascended the steps and stood next to the massive, ancient mottled stone chair.

He channeled Aurore's emotional reaction if she were to discover the truth about her death and spoke with a deep, resonant voice, "On April 1st, I acquired a spell known as the Soul Summoning Spell from Mad Lady of the April Fool's team..."

Without any need for amplification, Lumian's imitation of Aurore's voice harnessed the Concealed power that saturated the Nation of the Evernight, ensuring that everyone present could hear without any leaks.

It was evident that Hela had lent her assistance. Lumian, not being a true Warlock, couldn't employ supplementary spells himself.

Upon hearing this revelation, most members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society shifted their attention to the palace's crevice housing the April Fool's team. They noticed the conspicuous absence of Mad Lady and a significant number of her team

members.
They could now infer which group the traitors were affiliated with. Those who had been pranked by the April Fool's team couldn't help but feel a sense of vindication.
Lumian continued with his account. He didn't immediately divulge Loki and I Know Someone's "confessions." Instead, he reconstructed Aurore's emotions.
The trust in I Know Someone, the yearning for home, the obsession with clues, the fascination with Mad Lady's claims, the fear and unease upon discovering a soul fragment fused with her memories after using the Soul Summoning Spell and the subsequent split into a separate personality, the desperate search for treatment from I Know Someone, the helplessness and horror from her repeated improvements before repeated deterioration...
Lumian's agitation grew as he spoke. At times, he even choked back a sob.
Part of this stemmed from his frustration. He had failed to notice Aurore's abnormal emotions and state earlier. His relaxed demeanor around those close to him had caused him to overlook subtle changes. By the time he had realized the gravity of the situation, it had already spiraled out of control.
Simultaneously, as he recounted and simulated Aurore, her fragmented soul seemed to stir and hover near the edge of the seal, exerting an influence on his own psyche.
As he neared the end of his narrative, Lumian took a deep breath.
"I came perilously close to death because of it. Fortunately, I received assistance at the eleventh hour and managed to seal my split personality. That's why I was absent from the gatherings for almost half a year.
"After my initial recovery, I reached out to Madame Hela and recounted my encounter. We began our covert investigation into Loki, I Know Someone, and Mad Lady."
Hela took charge of the conversation.
"So far, Loki has revealed a significant number of issues and has been dealt a severe blow from our actions. I Know Someone, on the other hand, was apprehended by Muggle and the rest, resulting in the extraction of a wealth of information."
As Hela noticed the growing fear and concern among the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, she recounted Loki's mockery of Muggle and I Know Someone's intricate schemes.
This revelation stoked the flames of fury within most of the Research Society's members, and they began to grasp the reasons behind Muggle and Hela's actions.
Hela surveyed the assembled crowd and continued, "Muggle wasn't

the sole victim of their malevolence. Many members who had previously met untimely ends or disappeared were also targeted.
"Now, let's invite a few witnesses up."
With that, several witnesses, including Black Earth and other April Fool's team members, took the stage one by one to share what they knew. Their accounts sent shivers down the spines of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members, leaving them with a lingering fear.
It became abundantly clear that if Muggle hadn't survived and exposed their true colors, countless more individuals could have fallen prey to their schemes!
After the witnesses had concluded their accounts, President Gandalf presented the evidence, including diaries and items. Finally, he addressed the assembly, "According to I Know Someone's confession, we've managed to eliminate Loki's accomplices who were embedded in other teams. Among them, Pettigrew took his own life, overwhelmed by guilt. He was a good person but lacked determination and courage. If he had reached out to Hela and me earlier and hinted at the situation more effectively, many unfortunate events might have been averted. He wouldn't have had to carry this heavy burden."
As sighs rippled through the audience, Gandalf's resonant voice grew stronger.
"Everyone, we've only dealt with those accomplices known to I Know Someone. It's entirely possible that there are still spies embedded in various teams, loyal only to Loki. I propose the formation of a Review Committee consisting of Hela, myself, and three other trusted companions who have already undergone mutual reviews. Our mission will be to assess the remaining members and root out any hidden threats. We'll take decisive action against Loki and his allies."
Members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society hesitated, concerned that this move would expose their secrets and realities to the Review Committee.
If any ambitious individuals were part of this committee, they could potentially exploit the information to manipulate and control members, posing a more significant threat than Loki's gang.
Gandalf remained observant, waiting for their deliberations before adding, "Do not be overly concerned. Our review process won't delve into your personal secrets or true identities. The primary goal is for the Review Committee to draft a stringent contract that ensures Research Society members won't harm each other. Everyone will sign it, and the contract will be notarized by Apollo.

We don't care which deity you believe in, your real-world profession, or your hidden secrets. As long as you pose no threat and don't become hidden time bombs, you will be fine. This limitation will be clearly outlined in the contract."
Apollo, one of the five vice presidents, was known by a different nickname before. However, one day, he had unexpectedly approached the massive stone chair and announced his new moniker.
He had already successfully passed Gandalf and Hela's scrutiny.
In comparison to a comprehensive body-to-soul review, signing a binding contract to ensure each other's safety seemed far more acceptable to the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.
After a show of hands, the Review Committee was officially established with nearly unanimous support.
The committee comprised five members: President Gandalf, Vice President Hela, Vice President Apollo, Hidden Blade from the Sanctuary team, and Headmaster from the Academy team.
Hela had initially suggested that Muggle join the Review Committee, but Lumian felt that, given that he wasn't truly Muggle, it wouldn't be appropriate for him to hold such a position. Thus, he rejected Hela's proposal.
As the vote passed, Lumian overheard Hidden Blade Franca mutter, "Humans are still the same. If you want to open a window, there will always be plenty of objections. But if you propose to tear down the roof, they'll happily agree to let you open the window."
Upon noticing Muggle's gaze, Hidden Blade Franca added, "I didn't say that."
Subsequently, the members split into groups to discuss the terms of the contract. Their aim was to ensure that it contained no extraneous content and that it could effectively expose traitors and harmful actions without any loopholes.
As Lumian descended the steps, he noticed Hidden Blade Franca engaged in conversation with a tall individual wearing a lion headgear.
As he approached, the lion-headed man turned to "her" and offered a smile.
"Muggle, you're in the market district too?"
"007, why do you say that?" Franca asked with deliberate curiosity.
That 007 who's affiliated with an official faction in Trier... Lumian nodded and smirked.
"Just because you're active in the market district doesn't necessarily mean you live there."
"That's true," 007 replied, then turned to Hidden Blade with a hint

of jest in his voice, "You've already told me about that terrifying aura that night, and today you mentioned Loki and the others' betrayal. It would have been strange if I couldn't connect the dots and figure out that it was Madame Hela, you, and Muggle dealing with Loki and I Know Someone in the market district. Besides, I heard about a Marionettist going missing from Bureau 8 during that time, and it matched the abilities Loki displayed."

At this point, 007 looked at Hidden Blade and Muggle in puzzlement.

"None of you are Beyonders of the Hunter pathway."

The higher-ups suspected that the terrifying aura had been emitted by a high-level Beyonder of the Hunter pathway.

"Can we create that terrifying aura ourselves? It must be exogenous!" Franca was telling the truth, but she was deliberately misleading him into thinking about charms, Sealed Artifacts, and so on.

As 007 nodded slowly in contemplation, Lumian focused on him and inquired, "What's the official stance of Bureau 8 regarding the missing Marionettist? Why do they believe he disappeared?"

Chapter 412: Purge

Wearing a lion headgear, 007 took a moment to think before speaking.

"I've only heard rumors that the Marionettist disappeared with some classified information."

"That's not true," Franca replied, dropping the act. 007 had already figured out that the truth of that night involved the two of them teaming up with Hela to deal with Loki.

Loki didn't possess any such information!

007 didn't argue with her and continued discussing the rumors.

"And the classified information seems to be tied to a treasure left behind by a secret organization."

Left-behind treasure... Lumian and Franca both remembered the Castle Dylan mentioned by I Know Someone.

The location of this mysterious castle remained unknown, and Loki's dreams featured a towering and ominous ancient castle.

007 continued, "There are also members of Bureau 8 who suspect that the terrifying aura from that night is connected to the missing Marionettist. An intelligence supervisor named Antoine has been repeatedly asking for more details."

Antoine... He believes Loki's disappearance wasn't random, and something must have happened to him? Lumian made a mental note of the name.

After recounting the rumors, 007 glanced at Muggle and said half-jokingly, "It's best if you avoid the market district. Hidden Blade has stirred up trouble there. It's very dangerous."

"Who said that? Security has clearly improved!" Franca responded confidently.

Ever since she and Lumian had taken down the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob, the Savoie Mob had taken control of the entire market district. The frequency of mob fights, shootings, and killings had decreased significantly, and security had improved.

007 sighed and remarked, "That's only on the surface. There are more incidents involving supernatural powers than before."

"Sigh, I wonder when I'll get a long vacation."

Lumian, in the role of Muggle, conversed with 007 for a while before returning to the Academy team.

Professor, wearing a black butterfly mask, approached him and let out a soft sigh.

"I was worried that something had happened to you due to the Hidden Sage's whispers, and you needed some time to recover. Who would have thought that Loki's gang was behind it?"

After cursing Loki and his gang, she turned to Muggle for

confirmation.
"Have you noticed that the Hidden Sage's whispers have taken on a disturbing change in recent months?"
Aurore's grimoires didn't contain any records of this... Lumian thought for a moment and replied with a hint of bitterness, "Nothing much. As you know, I was affected by the Soul Summoning Spell in the first few months of this year. My mental state was unstable, and recently, I've sealed a part of my personality. The issues with my body haven't been fully resolved. I had already digested the Warlock potion and was planning to gather ingredients for advancement, but I haven't dared to do so now."
The professor understood and cautioned, "You should be careful. Until your mental problems are completely resolved, and you return to your normal state, don't consider consuming the potion."
Her voice lowered as she continued, "I've noticed that the Hidden Sage's whispers have been revealing more living knowledge lately. It's the kind of knowledge that actively seeks out individuals and insists on entering their minds. This makes it even more dangerous for Beyonders of the Mystery Pryer pathway like us."
More knowledge actively pursuing individuals... Has the Hidden Sage's nature changed? Lumian had heard his sister Aurore mention the Knowledge Pursuer, so he didn't appear confused or bewildered.
He nodded solemnly and said, "I'll be cautious."
Professor didn't press further and continued discussing the specifics of the contract with Associate Professor and the other Academy team members. "Muggle" Lumian also took part in the conversation.
It took more than half an hour for the teams to gather their members' opinions, document them, and submit them to the Review Committee.
After careful consolidation, adoption, and rejection by Gandalf, Hela, and others, along with collective discussions involving all members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, the terms of the contract were painstakingly finalized.
It wasn't clear if everyone tacitly agreed to enter the Nation of the Evernight, but the gathering included transmigrators. There was no requirement for members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society to be of the same kind or come from the same world. Hela was aware of this but chose not to bring it up. This allowed Lumian to fully meet the conditions and willingly comply with the contract's restrictions. He wouldn't secretly investigate the backgrounds of the Research Society members and wouldn't

intentionally harm one another.
However, there were certain exceptions. The contract granted the Review Committee the right to investigate suspected members, but they couldn't pass judgment or make decisions unilaterally. They had to convene a special gathering and inform all members of the situation. Every member would then vote on guilt and suggest a rough range of punishment.
Loki and the others, who were currently being pursued, were no longer protected. Anyone had the authority to apprehend them.
After the contract was approved, Hidden Blade Franca, who stood beside Lumian, let out a sigh of relief and genuinely commented, "Once everyone signs the contract, the Research Society will truly become a secret organization.
"It was too lax before. Many matters relied on everyone's self-awareness."
Lumian, showing only the lower half of Aurore's face, smiled and replied, "After all, you all didn't come together for anything significant before. You lacked a strict hierarchy. It's only natural that you had the freedom to do as you pleased."
A loosely organized group could only mature gradually after weathering various challenges.
As Vice President Apollo drafted an extensive mystical contract, the various teams resumed their daily discussions.
This time, the primary focus of each team was on Loki and his companions' actions and potential accomplices.
Gandalf, Headmaster, Hela, Hidden Blade, and others moved from team to team, observing each member's reactions closely.
Suddenly, the Research Society member disguised as a horse, began reciting the incantation to leave the Nation of the Evernight before the Review Committee could patrol his area.
"A Beyonder from ancient times, the ruler of the Nation of the Evernight, the noble Mother of Heaven..."
The voice echoed through the ancient palace, but before the figure could finish the incantation, his eyes closed, and he fell asleep.
The surrounding members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society were momentarily shocked before realizing the situation.
They cursed, "Traitor!"
This individual had been one of Loki's hidden accomplices.
With the mole incapacitated, the Review Committee resumed their patrol.
Fifteen minutes later, the contract, as large as two dining tables, was produced, bearing the signature of a Notary.
Exhausted, Vice President Apollo drank a potion provided by Gandalf to alleviate his mental fatigue.

In the following period, members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society ascended the steps one by one. Under the watchful eyes of the Review Committee, they read the contract and signed it using the nicknames they had been using for years.
During this process, the fog outside the ancient palace grew denser, as if preventing any external interference.
Once all the members had signed, three more traitors were exposed.
One of them transformed into a torch of light after signing, while another attempted to abduct his companion next to him, only to fall into a deep slumber. Seeing this, the third traitor chose to confess.
After a vote, the one who confessed was handled by a Hypnotist to erase relevant memories. He was expelled from the Research Society, while the remaining three turned into Beyonder characteristics.
Hela concluded, "Gandalf and I will investigate the family situations of these members. If they are ordinary people and there are no issues, I suggest auctioning off the Beyonder characteristics for money and providing compensation."
This compensation wasn't a reward for their wrongdoings but rather a way to assist the relatives of the members who had taken over the bodies and could no longer provide support.
Many members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society had transmigrated to this world five to six years ago. Some had wives and children. Upon hearing this proposal, they were moved and felt it wouldn't be fair to implicate their families.
Lumian had no objections. He still considered himself an outsider in this situation.
In the remaining time, Lumian visited various teams, following Hidden Blade Franca's guidance, and identified two Artisans capable of crafting mystical items.
He didn't rush to interact with the Artisans and entrust them with the Hypnotist Beyonder characteristic from I Know Someone. Instead, he planned to wait for Anthony Reid.
The assistance a Hypnotist could provide far exceeded that of a corresponding mystical item. After all, most mystical items couldn't speak or offer advice and guidance.
Due to Loki's incident and the exposure of hidden traitors, many members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society lost their enthusiasm and chose to depart without lingering, causing the number of people in the ancient palace to dwindle.
The Professor and Associate Professor couple, who had initially intended to organize an Academy team gathering in Trier,

temporarily abandoned the idea.
...
At noon the following day, Lumian casually arrived at Salle de Bal Brise with a Rouen meatloaf in hand.
Upon entering the café on the second floor, he spotted "Rat" Christo.
The short smuggling leader, sporting a pair of rat-like whiskers, greeted him with a smile.
Lumian raised his eyebrows and asked with a smile, "Got into trouble?"
Simultaneously, he thought to himself, This guy is a Sequence 8 Beast Tamer. Beyond that is Sequence 7 Vampire. With his current appearance, I wonder how the potion will increase his charm and height?
Christo chuckled and said, "There's something I want to ask you. I can't make up my mind."
Lumian pulled up a chair and sat down.
"And what's the matter?"
Christo, resembling a large rat, glanced around and said, "The Trier Cave Association invited me to join them. Why do you think they're interested in recruiting me?"
The Trier Cave Association was a group of individuals passionate about exploring and studying caves. Over time, it expanded its scope to include mining and drew in mine owners as well.
In Trier, the region with the most caves was underground.

Chapter 413: Cave Association

Upon hearing the name Trier Cave Association and their invitation to "Rat" Christo, Lumian didn't feel puzzled initially. Instead, he recalled the secret map of Underground Trier he had once seen from Gardner Martin.

The upper section of the map was as detailed as if one had infiltrated the municipal department and copied the original information.

Now, Lumian suspected that it might have been leaked from the Trier Cave Association.

This seemingly civilian organization had a large number of cave researchers. Some of them were employees of the municipal department or expert consultants. They had ample opportunities to come into contact with confidential exploration and construction information. There was no lack of people who had participated in the municipal modification decades ago. They were hands-on witnesses who had bored through various tunnels and reinforced all the quarry caves.

They had a deep understanding of Underground Trier.

Lumian looked at "Rat" Christo and asked thoughtfully, "Do you really not understand why they invited you to join the association?"

"Rat" Christo smiled sheepishly and said, "I have a guess, but I'm not sure.

"Ciel, don't tell me they've discovered I'm a smuggler leader?"

As a merchant who had long exploited Underground Trier's concealed nature to smuggle alcohol, weapons, and ammunition, Christo's knowledge of different tunnels, remote mines, underground tombs, and hidden chambers rivaled that of most members of the Cave Association. He even possessed secret routes that remained unknown to others.

Moreover, his nickname was "Rat," and he was a true Beast Tamer. With the help of his animal friends, his "tentacles" could extend to many areas that humans couldn't reach.

Christo suspected that the Cave Association had taken a liking to him because of these traits.

That was why he felt uneasy. Whether it was his status as a Beast Tamer in the Beyonder domain or his nature as a big-time smuggler, they were enough to send him to trial. His options would probably range from hanging, a firing squad, incineration, beheading, to becoming a low-level experimentalist.

Lumian chuckled.

"I don't believe that adventurers who join the Cave Association

haven't been involved in smuggling and don't have Beyonders among them."
"That's right," "Rat" Christo exhaled and said, "The Cave Association wants some business from me?"
Lumian glanced at him and said, "That's why you should consult the Boss about this, not me."
Christo lowered his voice and smiled ingratiatingly. "I'm just worried that the Boss will take the opportunity to assign me some dangerous mission."
Based on Gardner Martin's previous missions and the confidential map, this "Rat" keenly sensed the Boss's extraordinary interest in Underground Trier.
He felt that if he joined the Trier Cave Association, Gardner Martin might arrange for him to contact some members of the association and attempt to steal confidential information or participate in research and risky expeditions.
And that often meant danger.
He had consulted Lumian not only because he felt that his colleague was powerful, knowledgeable, and quick-witted but also because he wanted to find someone to shirk his responsibility in advance.
He had already made up his mind to join the Trier Cave Association and keep it a secret from Gardner Martin, the boss of the Savoie Mob.
For him to progress from an ordinary mobster to a Beyonder and take control of the Savoie Mob's smuggling business, he relied on two principles: One, he had to avoid provoking anyone stronger than him, choosing only to bully the weak. If he ran out of options, he could seek help from his colleagues and join forces. Two, he had to never place all his chips on a bet or one person.
Previously, he had fawned over Lumian, displaying a certain degree of submission. His words were filled with praise for Lumian because he valued his colleague's rapid advancement in Sequence, his strength, and his intelligence. If he befriended him, he might be able to save his life from a dangerous mission given by Gardner Martin at a critical moment.
Now that he had a chance to join the Trier Cave Association and interact with more factions and powerful figures, "Rat" Christo naturally didn't want to let it go. He didn't want his connections to be limited to the Savoie Mob and the market district. If Gardner Martin lost power one day or he was given a certain death mission, he needed to switch teams, one that could protect him.
Gardner Martin definitely couldn't know about this, but if he accidentally discovered the matter, Christo could naturally blame

it on Ciel:
I, 'Rat,' am a boorish and uncultured individual. I spend my days dealing with animals, laborers, and the dark underground. I have limited knowledge and ain't very bright. I often seek guidance from Ciel when I encounter matters, and he told me that I could join the Cave Association. He said it was a very normal and personal matter.
Lumian looked at Christo with a faint smile, his dark-blue eyes and grayish-black hair, and didn't respond to his inquiry. Instead, he asked, "You've been a Beast Tamer for a long time, right? Do you know what the next Sequence is?"
Judging by Rat's care and concern for his animal companions, even if he didn't know the acting method, the Beast Tamer potion should have mostly been digested.
"I don't know. The Boss didn't tell me," Christo's eyes darted around.
Lumian chuckled and said, "As far as I know, the next Sequence of Beast Tamer is a qualitative change. It will bring you an all-around improvement, including a longer lifespan and a body with better recovery traits."
Without waiting for Christo to press further, Lumian changed the subject.
"Therefore, you must work hard to complete the mission given by the Boss and strive to obtain the corresponding rewards as soon as possible."
"Yes, yes, yes," Christo hastily agreed.
Only then did Lumian steer the conversation back on track. He smiled and asked, "Do you wish to join the Trier Cave Association?"
Christo stammered, "I-I'm curious about their motives. Moreover, the person who came seems polite and keeps smiling, but I keep feeling that his actions are a threat to me. Yes, a threat!
"The one following him is even more expressionless. He looks at me as if I'm a dead man, a criminal awaiting trial!"
Curious... Lumian chuckled inwardly, grasping Rat's inclination and thoughts.
"Angrily," he said, "How dare they threaten a leader of our Savoie Mob? We must inform the Boss about this!"
"No, no need!" Christo panicked. "The Cave Association is a semi-official organization. We're just mobsters. There's no need to clash with them. This won't do you, me, or Red Boots, who are members of the Savoie Mob in the market district, any good."
Lumian clicked his tongue silently, planning to add fuel to the fire and force the truth out of "Rat."
At that moment, Sarkota, who had been guarding the staircase at

the bottom, walked up and said to Lumian, "Boss, two individuals calling themselves Trier Cave Association liaisons are here to pay you a visit."
Visit me? Someone from the Trier Cave Association is visiting me?
Lumian glanced at "Rat" Christo, who had his hands on the table in surprise and confusion. He leaned back in his chair and said to Sarkota, "Invite them up."
The Trier Cave Association's two liaisons were young. They wore black formal attire and blue bow ties. One had brown hair, brown eyes, and a reserved smile. The other had black hair and brown eyes, expressionless and cold.
The friendly liaison glanced at "Rat" Christo and fixed his gaze on Lumian's face.
He smiled and asked, "Good afternoon. Are you Monsieur Ciel Dubois?"
"Yes." Lumian wanted to see what the Trier Cave Association was up to.
The liaison who had asked the question earlier smiled condescendingly and said, "We're members of the Trier Cave Association. My name is Joseph, and this is my colleague, Rayan. We're here to invite you to join our association. We just invited Monsieur Christo, who's standing beside you, a few hours ago."
Lumian didn't hide his emotions and asked with amusement, "What do I have that caught your Cave Association's eye?"
I'm not a smuggler who frequents Underground Trier!
Could it be that you know that I entered the fourth level of the catacombs and obtained the Samaritan Women's Spring water?
Could it be that you still know that I'm a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order and am aware of a series of hidden catacombs like the Albert Mines?
Joseph replied with a smile, "We have our reasons. If you're willing to join our association, you'll definitely know the specific reason."
Rayan, who was taller than Joseph, added coldly, "That's a good thing for you."
Lumian gazed at them for a few seconds before chuckling.
"I'm not interested in your association."
The expressionless Rayan narrowed his eyes.
"I hope you won't regret it."
Joseph smiled meaningfully and said, "You might not know the significance of our Cave Association in Trier.
"Unfortunately, you missed this opportunity."
With that, the two of them turned around and prepared to walk towards the stairs leading to the ground floor.
As Lumian watched them leave, he raised his head slightly.

What is the Trier Cave Association up to? This matter is definitely not simple...

Perhaps this is an opportunity. If I offend the Cave Association, Gardner Martin probably won't let me stay in the market district anymore...

My current mission in the Iron and Blood Cross Order is to investigate the Sauron family's decline and explore the underground to find the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier. It has nothing to do with staying in the market district...

Once I leave the market district, I'll be out of Loki's sight. I can slip into the shadows and wait patiently...

I wonder if I can continue enjoying Salle de Bal Brise's share of profits...

If anything goes awry, I'll teleport away immediately...

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian suddenly knocked on the coffee table in front of him.

Amidst the thumping sounds, he glanced at Joseph and Rayan's figures and asked calmly, "Who gave you the permission to leave?"

Chapter 414: Reason

Joseph and Rayan came to a sudden halt, swiftly turning to face Lumian.

Lumian observed them in silence, offering no immediate explanation.

Joseph, maintaining his smug and condescending grin, inquired, "Monsieur Ciel, I'm not sure I comprehend your meaning."

Lumian spoke with composure, "I granted you permission to visit me, not the freedom to depart."

"This is my Salle de Bal Brise, not your home. You can't come and go as you please."

Though Lumian didn't intentionally use Provocation, his demeanor, tone, and message radiated unmistakable disdain, as if he held no fear of their wrath.

Rayan, his expression unchanged, narrowed his eyes, turned away, and continued his stride toward the staircase, completely disregarding Lumian's words.

Joseph, with brown hair and eyes to match, glanced at Lumian, then at Rayan. His gaze flickered, but he made no move to stop him.

Unfazed, Lumian calmly drew his revolver and discharged a round toward the staircase without hesitation.

With a bang, Rayan came to an abrupt standstill once again.

Slowly, he pivoted to face Lumian, exuding a palpable pressure from his eyes.

A subtle movement in Christo's pocket betrayed his discomfort and vigilance, sensing imminent danger.

Unperturbed, Lumian, holding the revolver, issued a sincere apology, "I'm sorry, I am carrying a concealed firearm."

As he spoke, he glanced back at Rayan and Joseph, a faint, fearless smile playing on his lips.

Joseph's feigned polite smile crumbled, replaced by a piercing gaze fixed on Lumian, as if assessing the mob leader's resolve, confidence, and strength.

Lumian contemplated uttering, "What are you staring at? If you want to fight, let's fight. If not, back down." to further infuriate the Trier Cave Association representatives, but considering the presence of "Rat" Christo, he abandoned the notion.

It would expose his true intention of provocation rather than investigating their true purpose, making it challenging to explain to Gardner Martin, the current or former Conspirer.

His unwavering gaze remained locked with Joseph and Rayan. With the revolver in his right hand, he deftly spun the cylinder.

After more than ten seconds that left "Rat" Christo visibly sweating, Joseph once again wore a polite smile and asked, "May we depart now, Monsieur Ciel?"
Oh, so you see through my true intentions of deliberately finding fault, hoping to get some action? Where's your arrogance and self-esteem? Lumian chuckled inwardly and said in an infuriating tone,
"Not just yet."
Rayan took an abrupt step forward, but Joseph restrained him.
The freckled, brown-haired, brown-eyed young man raised his chin slightly and locked eyes with Lumian.
"What must we do to gain your permission?"
Lumian's smile held a tinge of disappointment as he replied, "Answer my question, why did you invite Christo and me to join the Cave Association? I don't recall having a hobby of exploring and studying caves."
Joseph fell into a brief silence before explaining, "Our association's cave adventurers have encountered Christo several times underground and noticed his in-depth knowledge of Underground Trier. He appears to be well-acquainted with many hidden routes, which aligns with our cave association's criteria for invitations."
"Rat" Christo didn't voice any objections to this explanation. Although his primary activities involved smuggling underground, there were no completely hidden smuggling routes. They inevitably crossed paths with tunnels and mines known to cave adventurers and quarry police. During these encounters, it was inevitable that he would come across a few "passersby" or be covertly observed from a distance.
Lumian, all the while, idly stroked the revolver's muzzle without interrupting Joseph's narrative.
Joseph paused for a brief moment before elaborating, "There are two reasons for your invitation."
"The first reason is an Earth Blood ore specimen."
The Earth Blood ore specimen... Lumian hadn't anticipated this reason at all.
Without taking much time to consider, guided by his prankster instincts and recent advice from Anthony Reid, Lumian swiftly responded, "An Earth Blood ore specimen... Ah, I recall now. I acquired it from a lunatic named Flameng. Isn't it just a stone? It holds no value to me. I don't even know its whereabouts."
Lumian then added with a touch of nostalgia, "It appears to have been stolen. I left it in a rented apartment. Heh heh, individuals like us rarely have a place solely for rest and sleep. My apartment was laden with numerous traps. Who would have imagined a thief

successfully infiltrating and accessing the cabinet? What's more, they only took the Earth Blood ore and left everything else untouched. It puzzled me at the time, making me wonder if my recollection was flawed—the stone has long been lost, and no thief had broken in..."

Ciel Dubois's words were delivered with a sincere and detailed tone, and his demeanor conveyed an apparent lack of concern regarding the ore specimen. Now, it merely seemed like the loss of some insignificant item. Joseph and Rayan exchanged glances, their attitudes subtly shifting.

As Lumian finished his act, his mind raced, trying to decipher the rationale behind the Trier Cave Association's interest in the Earth Blood ore.

The Earth Blood's rock stratum has existed beneath Trier for centuries, if not millennia. The specific minerals concealed within it couldn't have surfaced recently, catching the attention of Flameng and other mineral researchers...

Official factions in Trier and certain secretive organizations probably know that a select few minerals within the Earth Blood rock stratum hold a connection to the death of Blood Emperor Alista Tudor. However, they haven't uncovered their practical significance, merely corrupting the minds of those who encountered them...

That night, I activated the brand on my right hand, causing numerous high-ranking individuals in Trier to sense it. Someone might have identified the aura of Blood Emperor Alista Tudor through various means, prompting an investigation into relevant items...

The whereabouts of the specific minerals within the Earth Blood rock stratum are a vital lead in their inquiry. Flameng's belongings were registered with the market district's police headquarters...

Given the Cave Association's connection to the authorities, they likely accepted the mission and sought me out, the one who had acquired Flameng's belongings...

But why didn't they just send someone from the police headquarters to inquire directly? The Purifier, Machinery Hivemind, and Bureau 8 members all possess corresponding police identities...

Of course, the authorities aren't unified. They are officially divided between the government and the two Churches, but in practice, each faction harbors internal divisions.

The Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Order Of Preachers clashes with the Brotherhood Minor and other ideological factions. The Church of the God of Steam and Machinery's cloister system opposes the

cathedral system. Bureau 8 is even more of a mixed bag. Some members come from secret organizations recognized by the government, some are former nobles like Sauron, who retains some influence, and others had been groomed by Bureau 8 over the years...
The only thing holding them together is the fact that Bureau 8 members can't officially align with any political party, or it would become even more chaotic...
In such a fractured environment, it is possible that a group within a faction had identified the Earth Blood ore's unique trail of clues but doesn't want others to know. Hence, they bypassed the police station's public channels and conducted their investigation through the unofficial Cave Association...
Perhaps someone within the Cave Association has recognized this clue and possesses an in-depth knowledge of underground terrain and mineral specimens. They are likely among the most proficient professionals...
Is this why they hadn't directly requested my cooperation with the investigation and instead attempted to recruit me into the Cave Association?
Lumian swiftly reached this preliminary conclusion, eagerly awaiting Joseph to reveal the second reason.
Joseph said, "We believed you had an interest in underground minerals and were a kindred spirit."
"Did it really get stolen, or did you leave it somewhere else but have forgotten about it?"
"It must have been stolen," Lumian said truthfully. "I found some traces of a break-in. Because of this, I became concerned about the gold I had saved, so I went to the bank to rent a safe deposit box for it."
Joseph nodded gently and said, "The second reason is that Kendall, an administrator of the catacombs, told us that among the individuals who brought Flameng's ashes there for burial, you seemed to possess a unique sensitivity to something abnormal that others couldn't perceive."
They connected the dots from the Earth Blood ore to the catacombs... Lumian was enlightened.
"I'm not sure what you mean by 'special.'"
Joseph didn't elaborate or push for further information. He simply looked at Lumian and asked, "Monsieur Ciel, may we leave now?"
Lumian regarded them for a few seconds before nodding slowly.
"Sure."
The situation had taken an unexpected turn, causing him to abandon his plan of provoking the two liaisons and antagonizing

the Trier Cave Association further.
While he had undoubtedly irked Joseph and Rayan, they had also obtained the answers they were seeking, or at least a part of them. There might be minor repercussions in the future, but a major confrontation was unlikely.
After Joseph and Rayan disappeared down the stairs, Lumian sat in contemplation for several moments. He holstered his revolver, stood up, and addressed "Rat" Christo, "This situation is more complex than I anticipated. I need to report it to the Boss."
He considered a dangerous possibility.
If it turned out that the Sauron family was behind the investigation into the special Earth Blood ore through the Cave Association, and they discovered a connection between Ciel Dubois, a mob leader, and the supposed son of a wealthy businessman who exhibited peculiar behavior in Poufer Sauron's King's Pie game, it could pose a significant problem.
Therefore, he needed to inform Gardner Martin immediately, be forthright with him, and eliminate any potential hidden threats while seeking useful advice.
With the Iron and Blood Cross Order as a secret organization backing this entire operation and his primary mission assigned by Gardner Martin, Lumian had no intention of handling the matter on his own.
"Rat" Christo hesitated for a moment before forcing a smile and responding, "Alright."

Chapter 415: The Sinner Complains First

Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, 11 Rue des Fontaines.

Gardner Martin, dressed in a crisp white shirt and black pants, stood before the floor-to-ceiling windows in the Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. Bathed in golden sunlight, he listened intently as Lumian and Christo shared the details of their encounter with the Trier Cave Association.

Lumian took the lead, briefly explaining the origins of the Earth Blood ore specimen.

"While I was staying at Auberge du Coq Doré, I crossed paths with a man named Flameng, a Lunatic who had a tragic encounter with the Montsouris ghost, leading to the bizarre deaths of his family.

"Occasionally, he regained lucidity. We drank together a few times. One day, he hanged himself. His belongings, including the Earth Blood ore specimen, ended up with the police. They said they were to hand them over to his surviving relatives, but they refused to accept them. Eventually, they asked me to retrieve them, which included the Earth Blood ore specimen.

"I knew that lunatic and had drinks with him. I didn't throw away the mineral specimen and casually placed it in an iron cabinet of my safe house..."

Lumian spoke the truth, not a single word being false. He only concealed the fact that he had helped Flameng escape the Montsouris ghost and Termiboros's reminder regarding the Earth Blood ore.

Gardner Martin, his brownish-red eyes reflecting wisdom and a touch of silver hair in his black hair, inquired, "Where is your safe house?"

Lumian replied honestly, "It's in the leftmost room on the third floor of 19 Rue des Blouses Blanches."

This wasn't on the same side as Apartment 6, which had emitted a terrifying aura, and there was a distance between them, so Lumian's answer was straightforward.

Gardner Martin smiled.

"No wonder you frequent Rue des Blouses Blanches so often. It's not just because of Jenna."

Boss, are you hinting at me not to visit Franca too often? Are you implying that you're aware of this situation? Lumian grumbled and continued.

He gave the same story he had told Joseph and Rayan from the Cave Association.

Finally, Lumian subtly probed, "Will this pose a problem for our Savoie Mob? There might be an official faction hidden behind the

Cave Association."
He wanted to convey to Gardner Martin that his cover in front of Poufer Sauron might be at risk, trusting the boss's intelligence to grasp the implication.
Gardner Martin gave a slight nod and turned his attention to "Rat" Christo, saying, "If you want to join the Cave Association, you can, but ensure it doesn't interfere with our smuggling operations."
Christo nodded repeatedly.
"Understood, Boss."
Following Gardner Martin's instructions, he departed from the study, leaving Lumian alone.
Gardner Martin smiled and consoled the official member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
"Don't worry about Poufer. Even if he figures out your true identity, he'll pretend he doesn't know. Ever since you became the king in the King's Pie game, he's been suspicious of you. He'll definitely probe and exploit you again and again."
It was a subtle message, urging Lumian to remain in the market district and continue overseeing Salle de Bal Brise, Auberge du Coq Doré, Salle de Gristmill, and other businesses.
Lumian couldn't help but smile with relief. "Alright, I was just worried that it would affect the most important mission."
Simultaneously, he sneered inwardly.
He keenly felt the irrationality of Gardner Martin's plan.
Transitioning control to another Beyonder to oversee Salle de Bal Brise and other operations, allowing Lumian to slip into the shadows, was a straightforward task for the boss of the Savoie Mob and the Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order. There were no downsides to this arrangement.
Even though he couldn't afford to mistreat Lumian, a subordinate on an important mission, he could compensate him by continuing to share the profits from Salle de Bal Brise and other businesses. He couldn't risk keeping an official member, who had already attracted suspicion, in his current location.
While Lumian's retreat into the shadows might make him appear even more suspicious, potentially putting the Savoie Mob in the crosshairs, Gardner Martin had encountered such challenges numerous times before. There had to be a solution.
Sensing the Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's suspicion, Lumian aimed to use the Cave Association to keep testing him.
His account and explanations were entirely truthful. Normally, Gardner Martin would believe him, but the issue was that too many unusual events had occurred around him recently. As a

former or current Conspirer, Gardner Martin would instinctively smell something fishy.
The detailed reasons were no longer enough to hide the overall abnormality.
With this thought in mind, Lumian's determination to kill surged.
He stared at Gardner Martin, positioned by the floor-to-ceiling windows, and estimated the distance between them to be about five meters.
At such a close range, if he were to suddenly employ the Spell of Harrumph, and Gardner Martin hadn't reached Sequence 4 and achieved godhood, lacking a mystical item to defend against such abilities, he could quickly subdue the Savoie Mob boss and eliminate him.
The current situation resembled that of two ordinary individuals without Beyonder powers standing within a five-meter radius. One held a high social status and excelled in combat, while the other held a low status and lacked physical strength. However, they both concealed a revolver and possessed exceptional marksmanship.
Within five meters, regardless of an ordinary person's status or combat skills, they would succumb to a single shot!
Considering the missions for the Tarot Club and the Aurora Order, Lumian composed himself and inquired, "Commanding Officer, I wish to purchase the Conspirer potion formula from the Order."
He had gained valuable insights from his advancement to Pyromaniac. He didn't want to go through the nerve-wracking process of searching for each Conspirer potion ingredient after digesting the Pyromaniac potion. His goal was to gather Conspirer ingredients in advance while continuing to digest the remaining Pyromaniac potion, thereby maximizing his time efficiency.
Gardner Martin responded with surprise, "Do you have that much cash for that?
"The Conspirer potion formula can command prices ranging from 70,000 to 80,000 verl d'or at the most mysticism gatherings, if not more. It's unlike Pyromaniacs, who are constantly perishing as others advance. Conspirers understand the importance of self-preservation, and they've become more cautious about sharing their Sequence potion formulas."
In Trier, the most common potion formulas available ranged from Sequence 9 to Sequence 7 of the Hunter pathway.
Without waiting for Lumian's reply, Gardner Martin grinned and added, "If you can unearth even a portion of the Sauron family's decline secret, I'll reward you with the Conspirer potion formula. It doesn't have to be the whole story, just a piece of the puzzle."
"If you're eager to advance and don't want to wait, as an official

member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, you have the privilege of purchasing the Conspirer potion formula at a discounted price of 60,000 verl d'or."
Lumian agreed without hesitation, "No problem. I'll bring 60,000 verl d'or tomorrow."
His initial plan had been to inquire with Mr. K and Madam Magician if Gardner Martin declined his request.
"Do you really have 60,000 verl d'or?" Gardner Martin chuckled.
Lumian's heart raced as he replied deliberately, "Just about. I previously assisted a tenant of Auberge du Coq Doré in recovering a 100,000 debt owed by Salle de Bal Unique on Rue Ancienne in Quartier de l'Observatoire. I took a bit over half of it."
In total, he had received 50,000 verl d'or in banknotes and gold, worth 30,000 verl d'or. After repaying Franca's 25,000, he had 55,000 left. Combined with the original 1,000 gold, 1,000 banknotes, and 4,000 verl d'or, he had 61,000 verl d'or in liquid assets.
"Salle de Bal Unique..." Gardner Martin repeated, his expression growing more serious. "You really managed to retrieve the debt from Salle de Bal Unique?"
Evidently, the Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order was familiar with Salle de Bal Unique.
Lumian nodded, his demeanor open and honest.
"Yes."
The members of the Savoie Mob at Salle de Bal Brise were more or less aware that he had helped Fitz collect his debt. Lumian couldn't keep Gardner Martin in the dark, so he decided to disclose it directly to confuse the situation and divert the Iron and Blood Cross Order's suspicions.
Furthermore, he could use this opportunity to put a little fear into Gardner Martin!
Gardner Martin scrutinized Lumian and subtly moved closer to the floor-to-ceiling windows.
After a few moments, he inquired with curiosity, "Have you never heard of the issues surrounding Salle de Bal Unique?"
"I have," Lumian replied with a smile.
If he had a monocle, he might have playfully inserted it into his right eye socket at that moment, savoring Gardner Martin's intriguing expressions and subconscious reactions.
After a pause, Lumian continued, "After accepting the commission, I conducted a thorough investigation of the dance hall and realized it wasn't as simple as it seemed. It had a mysterious background and posed a significant danger, so I initially decided to abandon it. However, one day, while trailing an adversary, I noticed something unusual. One of the guards at Salle de Bal Unique's entrance had

inexplicably vanished. And upstairs, behind a window, their boss, Timmons, appeared to have lost his spirit.
"I saw this as an opportunity, so I made an attempt to enter and collect the debt. To my surprise, I succeeded!"
As Lumian spoke, he took a step forward and asked earnestly, "Commanding Officer, are there any hidden dangers I should be aware of?"
Gardner Martin discreetly took another step forward and smiled.
"Not at the moment. Keep an eye out for any future anomalies."
Lumian seized the opportunity to express his bewilderment.
"Commanding Officer, something doesn't quite add up. Why have there been so many events swirling around me lately? Some I initiated, while others just seemed to find their way to me. Am I truly a harbinger of trouble? Or has my recent fate been to rush around and handle things, leaving me constantly busy and weary?"
Gardner Martin regarded him with meaning and replied, "Perhaps, this is the destiny that every Hunter is bound to face."
After Lumian departed, Gardner Martin shifted his gaze to the side.
A hidden door creaked open, and Supervisor Olson emerged, bearing a resemblance to a hungry bear.
"How is it?" Gardner Martin inquired.
Olson smirked and responded, "It's natural for him to be discontent with your arrangements. His loyalty isn't firmly established yet. He won't be able to join your team for the time being."
Gardner Martin shifted the conversation thoughtfully.
"The calamity on him is more conspicuous than any of us. Is it possible that he's more compatible?"
Olson fell silent for a few moments before replying, "Let's observe and wait."
...
Meanwhile, as Lumian returned to the market district, Franca sat at Trocadéro's Red House Café. Her gaze fell upon Browns Sauron, her long, flowing orange-red hair resembling a waterfall, as she asked, "When will you folks complete the audit?"
Browns Sauron didn't provide a direct response. She studied Franca, who had black hair and brown eyes, for a moment before saying, "We've identified a suspected member of the Bliss Society."

Chapter 416: Suspect

You're quite efficient. After receiving the warning, you swiftly unearthed the problem and found the clues. Instead of confirming it yourself, you're now informing me directly, intending to leverage this issue for the final audit? No wonder you didn't respond when I inquired about the audit completion date... Franca's mind raced as she grasped Browns Sauron's true intentions, representing the Demoness Sect.

Admiring the Demoness's appearance and demeanor, she smiled and asked, "Is it just a suspicion?"

She was prompting the other party to provide more details.

Browns Sauron ran her fingers through her long orange-red hair and spoke with a somber expression, "After learning from you that the Bliss Society interacts with the participants in the orgies, I observed my friends and noticed two members who were behaving unusually.

"One of them fell in love with a man once again and entered into a romantic relationship. Consequently, she started declining participation in the female orgies. The other one encountered a new woman and succumbed to her advances, leading to feelings of guilt for betraying us."

Friends? Girlfriends! Franca couldn't help but criticize.

She smiled and inquired, "Who do you suspect are the members of the Bliss Society?"

"That woman," Browns Sauron's aura remained dark. "She took the initiative to ask about the orgies and reassured Adaina that there was no need to feel guilty. She claimed that everyone has the right to control their bodies and freely indulge their desires without caring about others' opinions, societal judgments, moral restrictions, or religious constraints. She also stated that only deities and churches that genuinely embrace free will, physical freedom, and desire freedom are worth following."

Physical freedom, desire freedom... It's indeed the hallmark of the Mother Tree of Desire's believers... The core members of the Bliss Society truly excel as Actors. Their acting skills are remarkable. They can artfully package indulgence and debauchery, presenting desires as a manifestation of willpower, subtly diminishing the importance of rationality, clarity, and thoughtful reflection... Franca clicked her tongue and inwardly sighed.

For a Demoness of Pleasure, this approach proved highly effective. If the surrounding humans believed it, she could swiftly immerse them in intense and genuine pleasure, causing them to lose themselves in a sea of indulgence. Long-term consequences and

effects were typically disregarded by most Demonesses, as they would have already digested the potion by then.
However, Franca could discern that Browns Sauron was possessive and didn't want her girlfriends to engage with humans outside of the orgies.
"That certainly resembles the Bliss Society," Franca objectively remarked.
Browns added with a gloomy expression, "As for the other one, the lover is primarily concerned with money, houses, banquets, vacations, and various luxury items. It's quite evident that he's a male courtesan. They understand women very well, are eloquent, and possess considerable capabilities."
"What do you plan to do?" Franca asked curiously.
She sensed that Browns Sauron wasn't the type to simply give up on one of her girlfriends, especially when the new lover seemed unreliable.
Browns Sauron hesitated for a few moments before saying, "I've encountered him before, and I can tell he harbors an unusual desire for me. I intend to teach him a lesson, immersing him in pleasure without granting him true gratification. Once his body and mind are completely under my control, I'll discard him."
Wow... Did you learn this without a mentor? Do you even remember your original form? Franca raised an eyebrow, finding a rare target for mockery.
Browns glanced at her mockingly and retorted, "Based on what I've discovered and confirmed, you have two male lovers. One is mature, and the other is young. You seem to excel at enjoying yourself."
Her implication was clear: "What right do you have to mock me? I'm merely planning to offer that man some pleasure without engaging in actual intimacy. As for you, you've long abandoned your gender, ending up in the beds of different men!"
Half of my reputation has been tarnished by Ciel! Franca didn't lose her composure over the humiliation. She maintained a smile and said, "I view this as a unique experience.
"I've already become a woman. How can I not explore something entirely different from my previous existence? If you don't experiment now, you may never have the chance in the future. Don't you desire to return to your original form. Do you not know how?"
She subtly hinted at her knowledge of mysticism, paving the way for revealing her true motives for infiltrating the Savoie Mob in the future.
Browns was left momentarily speechless, unable to refute Franca

Roland's twisted logic.
Franca continued, "Life is confined to just a few decades. Why confine yourself to such a limited scope? As long as you avoid indulgence and obsession and always remain true to yourself, you're merely experiencing the present moment. Why not venture into various realms and experiences?"
At this moment, Franca had an epiphany.
Pleasure wasn't just something to offer to others; it was also meant for oneself!
Is this my first principle of acting...? No wonder my digestion speed hasn't been slowing down recently; it's even considered fast... *How can being coy be considered Pleasure?* Franca thought with a sense of delight.
Browns fell silent for a few seconds before speaking, "Your mindset surpasses my expectations, but with this mindset, it will be very, very challenging for you to perform a ritual, advance to Affliction, or experience pain and inflict it."
"I'm currently focused on Pleasure. I'll deal with Affliction when the time comes," Franca replied casually.
The digestion process would take months, half a year, or even longer to complete. *What was the point of worrying too much?*
Browns glanced at Franca for a moment, feeling a mix of repulsion and envy.
It wasn't that she desired it, but the Demonesses she had encountered, whether at higher Sequences or those who had just consumed the Witch potion, lacked this calmness and radiance. Each of them carried their own distortions, conflicts, and pain, and some even teetered on the edge of madness.
Browns decided not to delve further into personal philosophy and steered the conversation back on track.
"Adaina encountered the suspected Bliss Society member at an art exhibition. She goes by the name Theresa and comes from a former noble family. She's now an art dealer.
"I've conducted some investigation. Her identity and name are real, but they don't belong to her. In other words, there is a real art dealer named Theresa. She's impersonating her and has altered her appearance to make herself more appealing.
"This aligns with the characteristics of an Actor, as you mentioned. When Adaina had intimate contact with her, she also experienced the abilities of a Sex Addict.
"I attempted to tail her earlier, but I was too cautious and lost her trail.
"Adaina has a date with her tonight."
Franca listened attentively and then asked thoughtfully, "Can we

trust Adaina now?"
Browns's expression contorted as she replied, "She can be trusted."
Franca didn't press further and reminded her deliberately, "Then, will she exhibit any unusual behavior during her date with Theresa tonight? She's dealing with an Actor."
"Perhaps. She needs a Psychiatrist or an even more powerful Beyonder of the Spectator pathway to plant a cue or hypnotize her. This will help her maintain her normal state and prevent Theresa from becoming suspicious.
"If you can't find one in a hurry, I can introduce someone, but it will come at a cost."
Browns's expression softened as she nodded in agreement.
"You're indeed more experienced than I am."
Following her sigh, she smiled and asked, "Is that Psychiatrist also a man?"
Franca was taken aback.
"Yes."
Hey, what kind of image do you have of me!
The two of them silently refrained from discussing which side would handle the subsequent questions after identifying the fake Theresa. It was as if they had already reached an unspoken agreement.
...
At 7 p.m., in Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra, just outside the Delan Music Hall, Franca and Lumian, both dressed in light-colored pants, walked toward the entrance while discreetly holding each other's arms.
They had used Lie to alter their appearances and heights, ensuring that they wouldn't be recognized by anyone they might know.
Their target for this operation was the woman entering the concert hall, about seven to eight meters away.
Among them, Adaina, a participant in the Red House female orgies, had long, light-yellow hair with thin, curly bangs. Her face was powdered, her eyes light blue, and her nose perky, making her quite attractive. As for the art dealer, Theresa, she had long, wavy brown hair and a simple style. When her flaxen-colored eyes scanned the surroundings, they sparkled with liveliness.
This woman, suspected to be a member of the Bliss Society, had somewhat stiff facial features. It lacked softness but still exuded a strange charm.
Inside the small concert hall, Lumian and Franca found their seats and then swiftly locked onto Theresa and Adaina's location, discreetly observing them from behind.
Franca watched with interest as Adaina and Theresa leaned

against each other, feigning intimacy.
It was a pity that, despite her claim of loving women, Franca's limited experience mainly revolved around "teasing" Gardner Martin's other lovers. She had seldom been able to admire such scenes from a distance.
"Be careful," Lumian warned with a sigh.
Franca responded disapprovingly, "For a Trierien, this attitude is entirely normal. Look around you. Aren't others openly watching as well?"
Lumian snorted and didn't push the matter further.
Their immediate objective was observation, not tailing. It was crucial to assess the target's situation before taking any action.
Turning an ambush and surprise attack into an open confrontation would be a failure for any Hunter.
Lumian's primary goal was to gather information about Theresa's probable Sequence. If she happened to be a Sequence 7 Actor or a Sequence 6 Recipient, Lumian was confident in executing a successful surprise attack. However, if she turned out to be a Fallen Tree Spirit of a specific tree with a changed lifeform, the effectiveness of the Spell of Harrumph might be questionable.
Although Franca had suggested using Magic Mirror Divination to gather this intel, Lumian still wanted to witness it firsthand. The desires of a corresponding Sequence of the Mother Tree of Desire pathway couldn't be easily concealed!

Chapter 417: The Importance of Intel

The concert began as scheduled, and Theresa and Aldina separated, completely immersed in the orchestra's performance.

In Trier, the citizens displayed immense enthusiasm and respect for the arts. During the Living Artists Exhibition, the daily number of visitors surpassed that of those who frequented various execution grounds to witness executions.

Franca withdrew her gaze with regret and closed her eyes, savoring a symphony that evoked the image of moonlight glistening on a tranquil lake at night.

Lumian had received no formal education in this domain, so his knowledge of music was limited to three things. Firstly, Aurore's occasional humming and the melodies of shepherds' flutes. Secondly, songs from places like Ol' Tavern, Cordu Village Square, and Salle de Bal Brise, which were often laced with suggestive lyrics and rhythms. Lastly, the psalms from the Eternal Blazing Sun's Mass. However, now, he found himself deeply moved by the band's performance. His mood gradually settled, as if he could envision Cordu Village and the highland pasture nestled in the darkness.

It was a serene night, adorned with a canopy of stars.

Lumian wasn't entirely captivated by the music. From the corner of his eye, he scrutinized the lady impersonating Theresa, carefully observing her every move.

The imposter Theresa appeared highly emotional, her demeanor shifting from sorrowful during the lyrical passages to exuberant during the ensemble. She seemed to be completely attuned to the fluctuations in the music.

Lumian pondered whether she had an exceptional affinity for music or if she harbored a strong desire to perform and convey something profound.

If it was the latter, Lumian could tentatively conclude that the imposter Theresa was likely a Sequence 7 Actor. Based on his understanding of the Mother Tree of Desire's boon pathways, Beyonders typically wouldn't be so profoundly affected by the desires associated with a Sequence after moving beyond it. However, there might still be a more pronounced influence compared to ordinary individuals.

As time passed, the orchestra played three symphonies, culminating in the conductor turning, bowing, and addressing the audience.

"The final movement is titled 'The Girl Under the Moon.' I'd like to invite the most beautiful lady here onto the stage, so that our

entire orchestra can have the honor of taking a photograph with her as a beautiful memento."
Franca quickly lowered her head.
She had no desire to be chosen and become the center of attention. This would embarrass her a little.
Nonetheless, she wasn't overly concerned. Having altered her appearance and height with Lie, she could only be considered ordinary and mildly charming. After all, the greatest challenge for a Demoness of Pleasure when tailing a target lay in their inherent beauty, charisma, and attention-grabbing aura. If she didn't become invisible or remain concealed in the shadows, she ran the risk of being discovered.
Such requests were not uncommon in Trier, and several women in the audience were eager to step forward.
To them, being chosen would symbolize a significant acknowledgment of their appearance and demeanor.
Lumian's gaze swept over the attendees, eventually settling on Aldina and the imposter Theresa.
The former seemed visibly excited, her anticipation clear in her demeanor. On the other hand, the latter's body exhibited an abnormal tension, and she trembled slightly, a mix of excitement and nervousness evident in her demeanor.
Upon witnessing these reactions, Lumian couldn't help but smirk slightly, gaining a rough understanding of the fake Theresa's situation.
The desire for recognition was one of the fundamental desires of a Sequence 6 Recipient of the Mother Tree of Desire pathway!
Hence, it was likely that the fake Theresa was a Sequence 6 Recipient, not yet a Sequence 5 Fallen Tree Spirit. Otherwise, her yearning for recognition wouldn't be so overwhelming.
The invitation to bring the most beautiful lady onto the stage for a photograph wasn't a mere coincidence—Lumian had sponsored it himself.
After discovering that the first stage of the date between the imposter Theresa and Aldina involved attending a concert, Lumian had sought out the Delan Music Hall to ascertain the evening's repertoire. He had then devised a plan in line with Trier's style based on the title of the final movement, attempting to bribe the orchestra.
Ultimately, he had succeeded in convincing the conductor, not just because he had used Franca's 1,000 verl d'or, but also because Lumian had provided a compelling reason.
It was a romantic gesture intended for a certain lady, a gesture driven solely by affection, without any expectation of reciprocation

or leaving a name.
Romantic gestures had a special place in the hearts of these Trier artists.
Through this event, Lumian sought to "detect" whether the fake Theresa harbored any exceptional desires.
A skilled Hunter couldn't simply wait for opportunities to arise; they had to know how to create them!
Of course, the precondition was having sufficient intel. Otherwise, planning with precision or avoiding easy detection would be impossible.
The conductor scanned the room and singled out the woman whom he believed to be the most beautiful.
He also assumed that she was the object of the young man's affection from earlier in the day.
Such extraordinary beauty was a rarity!
The woman, with her bright gray eyes and neatly tied black hair, gracefully approached the orchestra, while the fake Theresa slouched in her seat, unable to hide her disappointment, regret, and frustration.
"How should I address you?" the conductor inquired of the lady in the elegant black court dress beside him.
With a gentle and melodious voice, she replied, "Clarice."
Franca gazed at Clarice with admiration, finding her exceptionally captivating, although she couldn't quite pinpoint the reason why.
After the concert concluded, Lumian and Franca decided not to tail Adaina and the impostor Theresa. Instead, they headed straight to Room 502 in Apartment 25 on Rue Ménier in the square district.
This was a rented apartment that they had temporarily cleared out by paying. Across the way, in Room 401 of Building 23, was Adaina's chosen rendezvous point for clandestine meetings.
Tonight, she would return to that very room with the fake Theresa.
With Lumian and Franca's enhanced Beyonder vision, the distance between them and the target room wasn't enough to obscure their view of the situation inside. Their primary objective now was to remain hidden and avoid detection by the fake Theresa while observing.
Before long, the window of Room 401 in Apartment 23 across the street illuminated. Several gas wall lamps cast a bright glow throughout the living room.
Immediately after, Lumian witnessed the passionate embrace between the fake Theresa and Adaina as they approached the glass window.
Their longing was palpable, but they also wanted to shield their intimate moment from prying eyes.

"Quite focused," Lumian teased with a smile.
Franca didn't reply, her breathing growing heavier.
"Be prepared," Lumian whispered to Franca, making sure the fake Theresa's attention was on her companion.
Franca nodded slightly and responded in her usual tone, "Got it."
Her primary mission was to watch for any unexpected developments.
Without hesitation, Lumian activated the black mark on his right shoulder.
A faint light shimmered beneath his clothing, and he vanished from the shadows of Building 25.
Across the street in the apartment, Adaina and the impostor Theresa wrestled with the curtains while they were stuck to one another, attempting to shield the glass window.
Lumian's form materialized suddenly, two meters behind the fake Theresa, facing Adaina, whose eyes were clouded with desire and cheeks flushed.
Adaina's eyes narrowed, and her pupils dilated. She couldn't fathom how a tall, slender man with blond hair and blue eyes had appeared in her room out of nowhere.
For a moment, it felt like she was trapped in a surreal dream. The disjunction between her physical senses and her bewildered mind was stark.
Almost simultaneously, Lumian let out a heavy harrumph.
Two beams of white light shot from his nose, targeting the fake Theresa and affecting Adaina.
In unison, the two women closed their eyes and slumped into unconsciousness.
Lumian acted swiftly, catching the fake Theresa before she could fall to the ground. He then raised his right palm and delivered a firm strike behind her ear.
A mystical coma combined with a physical one!
With the fake Theresa safely incapacitated, Lumian gently placed her on the carpet, keeping a cautious distance from the unconscious Adaina.
He squatted beside the woman he suspected to be a Recipient and began searching her dress and handbag for canisters.
Having familiarized himself with the mystical drugs commonly used by the Bliss Society, Lumian located a canister of sedatives, unscrewed the cap, and brought it to the fake Theresa's nose, allowing her to inhale its contents for more than ten seconds.
Only then did Lumian exhale a sigh of relief. He stowed away the sedative, no longer concerned about the imposter Theresa waking up suddenly.

He stood up and made his way to the glass window, where the curtain was only partially closed. Lumian signaled to the fifth floor of the opposite building with his thumb and index finger forming a circle, while his other three fingers remained extended.
He was informing Franca that the operation had been successful. The target was under control, and she could join him now. Lumian might need to employ Magic Mirror Divination later.
After drawing the curtains shut, Lumian turned his attention to the unconscious fake Theresa and sighed inwardly.
Intel is crucial...
The same principle applied to the synergy of abilities.
Without a rough understanding of the names and characteristics of Sequence 9 to Sequence 5 within the Actor pathway, along with knowledge of their corresponding desires and states, Lumian wouldn't have taken such a calculated risk. He wouldn't have been able to resolve the situation in just a few seconds.
As for the Contractee's three abilities, if they weren't carefully chosen and harmonized, they could easily be defeated by a Sequence 9 Hunter, much like the mouth-orifice monster in Cordu's ruins. Even with Spirit World Traversal and the Spell of Harrumph, Lumian might stand a chance against some Sequence 5s, but it would be a formidable challenge to sustain such efforts.
...
As Lumian waited for Franca to join him in the adjacent apartment to Adaina's,
Browns Sauron remained hidden in the shadows, her keen senses tuned to the situation behind the wall as she gazed at the building opposite.
She could already discern the sounds of Adaina and the fake Theresa returning to the apartment, along with the rustle of curtains being drawn. These scenes seemed to play out vividly in her mind.
The situation tormented her. She felt a deep sense of injustice and pain, as though she had willingly sent her lover into the arms of her romantic rival.
Despite her understanding that this was a carefully planned trap and that her lover and her rival had been intimate on multiple occasions, she still felt an overwhelming sense of worry and anxiety. The sporadic noises only fueled her imagination with various scenarios.
Standing there made her uncomfortable, and leaning against the wall didn't alleviate her unease.
Observing Franca and her young lover's concealed apartment across the way, Browns Sauron couldn't help but mutter with

frustration, "Why haven't they launched their attack yet?"

Chapter 418: Beatrice

Franca ended her concealment and quietly opened the door to Adaina's apartment. The first thing she saw was Lumian, a tall, slender man with blond hair and blue eyes. He was crouched beside the unconscious Adaina, vigorously wiping her face with a wet towel.

Franca lowered her voice and asked in confusion, "W-what are you doing?"

Shouldn't the target be the Bliss Society member posing as Theresa, the art dealer?

Lumian smirked and responded, "I've had a sudden thought.

"Actors can impersonate anyone. Once the imposter Theresa establishes an intimate relationship with Aldina, she can easily control this female companion and impersonate her to infiltrate the Red House Café's female orgies."

"Allowing Adaina, who everyone is familiar with, to convey the Bliss Society's philosophy and hidden evil god faith will definitely be more persuasive and trustworthy than a new member."

At this point, Lumian gazed toward the bedroom in a chilling tone and said, "Perhaps, the real Adaina is hidden in a corner here, in the form of a corpse."

Franca couldn't help but imagine such a grim scenario and took a deep breath.

She straightened her back and muttered to herself, "Not a bad story. I'll share it with Jenna later."

After her muttering, she silently closed the door and approached Lumian, refuting his suspicion.

"Browns Sauron is likely a Demoness of Pleasure. Surely, she can recognize the authenticity of her female companion? Furthermore, she interrogated Adaina and knows the approximate abilities of an Actor."

Lumian, who had been "assisting" Adaina in removing her makeup, confirmed that despite her altered appearance, she was still the same person.

He chuckled and said, "Based on your description, I don't fully trust Browns Sauron's judgment. She clearly has less experience in the Beyonder domain than you. However, since she has the Demoness Sect backing her and confirmation has been made, the interrogation results are still credible."

Lumian didn't spare Adaina another glance. He gestured towards the fake Theresa, who had been hit with a triple dose of unconsciousness—the Harrumph Spell, a physical knockout, and a sedative from the Bliss Society. He turned to Franca and said, "Use

Magic Mirror Divination to confirm if she's a core member of the Bliss Society."
While Lumian had already suspected the fake Theresa was a core member based on her performance at the concert, they hadn't followed her closely the entire way. They had instead been waiting at their destination. What if she had sensed something amiss and had switched to a decoy during the journey?
Considering the fake Theresa possessed a unique concoction like the Bliss Society's truth serum, she was undoubtedly connected to the Bliss Society. However, it remained uncertain if she was a core member.
This answer would guide Lumian's subsequent actions.
...
Next door to Adaina's apartment, Browns Sauron continued to monitor the commotion. She could hear faint and indistinct conversations but couldn't detect much else.
Adaina and the fake Theresa plan to chat for a while and have some red wine? Though it isn't overly passionate, it holds a romantic ambiance... Browns Sauron glanced at the building opposite, mentally urging Franca and her lover to begin, hoping they wouldn't wait until the fake Theresa was completely engrossed in desire before launching a surprise attack.
...
In the living room of Adaina's apartment, Franca raised her right palm and rapidly created a crystalline icicle. With precision, she pierced the fake Theresa's hand, drawing a small amount of blood.
The fake Theresa instinctively pulled back her arm but hadn't broken through the three-layered coma.
Franca then smeared the blood on a mirror, intending to use it as a medium and sacrifice to ask an entity from the Underworld, hoping to obtain a unique identification of spirits.
Once all preparations were complete, Franca picked up the mirror and recited in Hermes,
"The shadow that lingers in the Underworld, the friendly creature that can be communicated with, the unique eye that never dies..."
The surface of the blood-stained mirror suddenly emitted a dark green hue, and a pale-white aqueous light rippled.
After reciting the incantation, Franca asked respectfully, "Is the owner of the blood Theresa, the art dealer?"
"No," came an indifferent voice from the mirror, as if enduring the corrosion of endless time.
Franca posed her second question.
"Is the owner of the blood a core member of Trier's Bliss Society?"
The indifferent voice gradually faded.

"Yes."
Franca refrained from asking further questions, as the entity only answered two at a time.
She watched as the pale-white aqueous light rapidly receded, and the blood on the mirror's surface strangely seeped in and disappeared.
Turning to Lumian, Franca reported, "She's a core member of the Bliss Society."
Lumian let out a soft sigh and said, "Unfortunately, I don't know how to perform a lobotomy. Anthony Reid isn't a Hypnotist yet, so we can only channel the spirit directly."
Using the truth serum didn't guarantee that the fake Theresa wouldn't resist when she woke up. Given her faith and abilities, a fierce battle was inevitable when the time came, and there was a high chance that she would be killed. In that case, he decided to proceed now.
As Lumian spoke, he crouched down, his right palm ablaze with crimson flames.
The flames intertwined and swiftly converged, turning white.
Gently pressing his right palm against the fake Theresa's body, the blazing white fireball vanished into thin air.
Rumble!
A muffled explosion erupted from within the fake Theresa's body. She trembled a few times before life left her completely.
Franca had been busy preparing the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell during this entire process.
While she could forcibly channel the spirit while the fake Theresa was unconscious, it wasn't a safe option. It could lead to unnecessary trouble for her mind and spirit, and the fact that the target believed in an evil god meant there was a risk of corruption if she wasn't careful.
...
Next door to Adaina's apartment, hidden in the shadows, Browns Sauron sensed a subtle fluctuation.
Powers have been used. Has it begun? She wondered if the imposter Theresa had initiated the powers of the Mother Tree of Desire pathway to flirt or if Franca Roland and her lover had already infiltrated the target location and were preparing to attack.
Without hesitation, Browns Sauron, dressed in a black hunting suit, silently pushed open the window and crawled out through the shadows. She clung to the outer wall and slowly approached Adaina's apartment.
...

Franca completed the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell, and the dark and deep mirror aqueous light flickered, "reflecting" a beautiful yet pale-white face.
"What's your name?" Franca asked directly, using the simplest question to test the effect of the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell.
The fake Theresa's illusory voice replied, "I'm Beatrice Incourt."
"What's your true identity?" Franca continued to ask.
Beatrice Incourt's expression remained stoic as she replied, "I run a winery. It's from my deceased husband."
Franca then directed the question to the crucial point.
"Are you a core member of the Bliss Society?"
"Yes." Beatrice Incourt's nod was subtle.
Franca didn't delve into the Bliss Society's faith or any recent revelations. Although she wasn't as fearful of the evil god, the Mother Tree of Desire, as she was of the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings, to the point of not daring to channel spirits, she was aware of the risks involved. She knew what to ask and what not to ask, what was safe, and what could lead to corruption.
After a brief pause, she inquired, "Do you know Lumian Lee or Ciel Dubois?"
Beatrice replied in a daze, "I don't know."
I don't know... Lumian, who was listening, raised his eyebrows.
None of the core members of the Bliss Society know about Susanna Mattise's ultimate plan?
Franca was equally surprised. She frowned and asked, "Why did Susanna Mattise go to the market district before her death?"
Beatrice Incourt replied calmly, "She wanted to awaken the great divine tree and allow its roots to enter Fourth Epoch Trier, allowing its crown to reach into the kingdom of the false gods."
"Did she say what the awakening process was?" Franca pressed.
Beatrice Incourt's voice grew colder, and her expression became more wooden.
"She didn't say."
They really don't know that Susanna Mattise wanted to capture me and sacrifice me to the Mother Tree of Desire? Lumian's thoughts raced, and he whispered a name to Franca: "Maipú Meyer."
Franca understood and asked the spirit in the mirror, "Where is Maipú Meyer?"
Maipú Meyer was the former manager of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, Susanna Mattise's paramour, and her most trusted subordinate.

Beatrice replied in a voice increasingly resembling the dead, "I'm not sure. He's a man, and we despise and keep a distance from him."

Upon hearing this, Lumian was enlightened, roughly understanding the reason.

Regarding the Tree of Shadow, Susanna Mattise, who had become an evil spirit, was extremely extreme in her choices and actions. She didn't inform the other core members of the Bliss Society about the detailed situation or progress. Only her direct subordinates, Maipú Meyer and Charlotte Calvino, knew the complete plan.

After Susanna Mattise and Charlotte Calvino's deaths, Maipú Meyer, who had relied on the former to become a core member of the Bliss Society, was ostracized and suppressed. Consequently, he didn't divulge the relevant issues to anyone else.

This made sense. A secret organization centered around "desire" would undoubtedly experience a multitude of desires, both open and covert. Maipú Meyer was a visible anomaly among the core group that advocated women and loved women.

Franca pondered for a few seconds and changed her question, "What are Maipú Meyer's plans for the time being?"

Beatrice's face turned pale-white and green, and even her stiff expression vanished.

"A few weeks ago, Maipú Meyer mentioned that he wanted to sneak back to the market district to do something. I haven't seen him since."

Sneak back to the market district to do something? Lumian and Franca were alarmed by this revelation.

Chapter 419: New Priestess

Why did Maipú Meyer return to the market district?

This question raced through the minds of Lumian and Franca simultaneously. They felt a lurking danger.

Could it be that Maipú Meyer genuinely cared for Susanna Mattise and sought retribution?

But even then, exposing the true killer and concealed secrets to the other core members of the Bliss Society seemed like the most fitting way to exact revenge!

Without harnessing the collective might of the entire organization, he would inadvertently aid his adversary, Lumian, by relying solely on his own capabilities!

As Lumian observed Beatrice's pallid countenance and vacant gaze, he tried to think from Maipú Meyer's perspective and find a rationale for his actions.

Maipú Meyer, a Sequence 6 Recipient, harbors an insatiable hunger for recognition and a fervent desire to accomplish something noteworthy...

Despite facing rejection and isolation from the other core members of the Bliss Society, he does have a motive to make a substantial solo contribution and earn genuine recognition...

While revealing the existence of the Tree of Shadow to Beatrice and the others could be seen as a contribution, it doesn't measure up to rectifying his past mistakes independently to appease the Mother Tree of Desire to the fullest extent. The latter would truly earn him recognition...

This peculiar competition might be perplexing to ordinary folks, but it isn't unusual for a Recipient to engage in it...

The question now is: What does Maipú Meyer hope to achieve in his quest for recognition?

Is it revenge against me? Although a direct confrontation holds little hope for him, he could pose a significant threat if he conceals himself in the shadows and suddenly influences me at a critical moment. After all, I lack a substitute ability, and my physical strength hasn't undergone a qualitative change compared to ordinary people. He could eliminate me with a revolver.

However, Maipú Meyer must have heard plenty about me from Susanna Mattise. There is a good chance he knows about the angel sealed within my body. Isn't he concerned that corruption might erupt after my demise, potentially dragging him down as well?

If he were to perish, how could he satisfy his yearning for recognition?

Or is it the mere notion of taking a formidable foe with him to the

grave that would leave the other members of the Bliss Society awestruck and filled with genuine remorse and admiration? Is his ultimate aim to climax in tears and be propelled towards his demise by desire?
Otherwise, does he aspire to make a sacrifice akin to Susanna Mattise's? Yes, securing recognition from the Mother Tree of Desire is a higher-level and noble pursuit.
But the Tree of Shadow is severely damaged and won't recover for a long time. How can he even make such a sacrifice
Lumian struggled to decipher Maipú Meyer's plan or intentions, vaguely grasping his motives.
Nonetheless, Lumian couldn't suppress a surge of frustration and violence at the mere thought of a pair of icy eyes lurking among the pedestrians, nearby tenants, dance hall customers, and peddlers. It was as though someone close to him had been replaced by Maipú Meyer without anyone's awareness. He burned with anticipation to unmask the Actor.
The detrimental effects of the contracts, items, and brands on him continued to destabilize his emotions.
Franca, on the other hand, didn't dwell on this. Although the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell endured much longer than standard spirit channeling spells, it was not entirely boundless. There was still a time limit, one measured in minutes. She was unwilling to squander this precious time on analysis that could be postponed.
She continued to ask Beatrice Incourt.
"Of all the members of the Bliss Society, who does Maipú Meyer have the closest relationship with?"
Beatrice's voice grew increasingly ethereal.
"He had the strongest bonds with the members in the market district, but they're either deceased or captured."
Genuinely ostracized... Franca's hopes dimmed, and she inquired further,
"Who in the Bliss Society is most likely to be privy to Maipú Meyer's whereabouts and plans?"
Beatrice responded lifelessly, "No one, not even the new high priestess."
Franca found herself at a dead end and changed her line of questioning.
"Who is this new high priestess?"
Beatrice's eyes were piercingly vacant as she replied, "It's Siber."
"What's her true identity?" Franca pressed.
Beatrice's eyes on the mirror's surface seemed far more translucent than before.
"I don't know. She joined us later. At that point, we had evolved

beyond a simple lesbian organization. We started concealing our true identities.
"Siber might still be a theater actress."
...
On the outer wall of Adaina's apartment, Browns Sauron clung there in silence, resembling a colossal black spider.
Through the curtains, she could only discern two shadows not far away. The voices were even fainter and more distant than before, but she could vaguely identify them as female.
Adaina and the imposter Theresa are still conversing? That doesn't add up. At this proximity, with an Assassin's acute hearing, I should be able to clearly hear them even through the sealed glass window and thick drapes... What's happening inside? Browns Sauron's anxiety and curiosity swelled as she attempted to extend invisible spider silk through the gap in the window.
...
Franca's Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell had reached its limit, and she concluded it rationally. She watched as Beatrice Incourt's image faded from the mirror's surface.
She wasn't overly disheartened because she already knew the crucial details about several core members of the Bliss Society and their weekly gatherings' time, venue, and method.
But there is no need to personally track them. They are unaware of Ciel. Even if the Rose School of Thought locates them, they wouldn't extract any valuable information... Franca cast a glance at Lumian, stowed away the mirror, and dispelled the wall of spirituality.
Amidst the howling wind, the two of them sensed a disturbance at the window and the presence of a figure that seemed human.
The wall of spirituality had isolated their movements, reducing interference but also affecting their perception and surveillance of the surroundings.
Franca's form abruptly vanished, and Lumian sidestepped, evading the window's direct line of sight.
They didn't rush to attack because they had a vague notion of who was outside.
Amidst the commotion, Browns, who had discreetly pried open the window, witnessed the curtain "self-consciously" part to either side, revealing her own silhouette.
Just as she was about to react, she spotted Franca Roland's current disguised countenance.
Their gazes locked, and silence hung in the air for over ten seconds.
Finally, Browns snapped out of her trance and inquired with

concern, "Where's Adaina?"
"She's unconscious." Franca gestured towards the carpet near the window.
Browns scrutinized her female partner, then glanced at the motionless impostor Theresa, and queried once more, "Has it been dealt with?"
"It's resolved," Franca replied calmly.
The spirit channeling had already come to an end!
Browns's gaze darted between Franca and Lumian, her expression a mix of surprise and confusion. She inquired,
"When did you launch the attack?"
Before the curtains were fully drawn... Franca was about to respond, but she hesitated, realizing that revealing the timing of the attack might expose Ciel and her combat abilities. Instead, she quickly changed her response and smiled.
"Why don't you take a guess?"
Browns Sauron recollected the faint movements she had sensed but found no overt signs of a battle.
This left her even more astonished.
Could this wild Demoness and her young partner be truly that formidable?
Are their richer experiences and varied gains truly that advantageous?
Consumed by jealousy, Browns leaped into the room and shut the window.
She doesn't seem concerned about being attacked by us at all... Is she inexperienced, or does she have great confidence in the Demoness's various substitutes? Or is there something she's relying on? Lumian observed with indifference, making no move.
Franca maintained her smile and said, "We've gathered some intel, including information on the current high priestess of the Bliss Society and a few core members."
She began recounting the information she had acquired from Beatrice.
The more Browns listened, the more astonished she became.
They managed to gather so much intel?
This should have taken a significant amount of time!
When did they attack and how long did they take to finish the battle?
It couldn't be that the imposter Theresa was ambushed the moment she entered the room and approached the window, could they?
Based on her observations, this member of the Bliss Society appeared to be a Sequence 6 Recipient, on par with her and Franca

Roland, even surpassing the suspected Sequence 7 Pyromaniac, Ciel Dubois!
Franca paid no heed to Browns's reaction and continued, "I'm pleased to inform you that our problem is simpler than we thought, and it's been resolved. Now, it's your problem. Heh heh, Beatrice isn't the only core member of the Bliss Society with an interest in the Red House Café."
She was subtly suggesting that the Demoness Sect should "take over" in eliminating the remaining members of the Bliss Society.
"Are you instigating me?" Browns asked sharply.
Franca replied with a smile, "No, just a reminder."
While they continued their conversation, Lumian returned to Beatrice's lifeless form, crouched down, and conducted a more thorough search.
This time, he discovered banknotes and gold coins amounting to 1,500 verl d'or, along with a neatly folded note.
Lumian unfolded the note and read the Intisian written on it: "Go to the hostel and retrieve the painting within three days."
Hostel... *What hostel? What painting is this referring to?* This seems like a deal made by the authentic art dealer, Theresa, but somehow, the receipt ended up in the hands of the impostor? Where is the real Theresa now... We forgot to inquire about this... Lumian pondered the implications as he held the note.
He stood up, prepared to question Browns Sauron about the real Theresa's situation. Although Browns recognized that Franca was trying to instigate her, she couldn't deny that Franca had a point.
Browns looked down at Adaina, attempting to rouse her.
At that moment, all three of them halted simultaneously and directed their attention toward Beatrice Incourt's lifeless body.
The light over there seemed to dim slightly, and the corpse underwent a subtle transformation.

Chapter 420: Beyonder Item

Beatrice Incourt may have already been lifeless, but something within her appeared to stir. Slowly, it seeped out, rising like invisible steam, as if it sought an escape into some distant darkness.

This caused the ambient light to dim, making the apartment's ceiling appear strangely ethereal. Lumian, Franca, and Browns all felt an uncanny sensation, as if they were under scrutiny.

It wasn't as if an actual gaze was directed at them; rather, it was as if they were the sole occupants of the entire building, with no obstructions to the crimson moonlight in the sky, which inevitably cast an eerie glow upon them.

Thump, thump. Lumian's heart raced.

The two Demonesses, skilled in divination, experienced an overwhelming sense of imminent danger.

With a sudden snap, a translucent boil of blood materialized on Beatrice Incourt's lifeless face, followed by a strange, tree-like wart with a brownish hue.

The wart burst open, oozing blood-colored pus, wet and sticky.

Wh— Lumian's pupils dilated, caught off guard by this turn of events.

Although he had taken the lives of more than a few members of the Bliss Society and had spent some time beside their corpses, he had never encountered anything like this. Death ended everything. How could a corpse cause an unsettling undercurrent to surge around it?

Even though Lumian didn't fully grasp the situation, he swiftly formulated a plan.

He glanced at the hazy, illusory ceiling and the faint movements within the walls. His intention was to step forward, seize Beatrice's lifeless body, and "teleport" to the Albert Mines, a place he had visited previously.

The deeper they ventured into the Fourth Epoch Trier's underground, the greater the peril. Various corruptive elements that led to a loss of control lurked there. Even with a corpse on the verge of mutation, it shouldn't pose a significant issue.

That place was inherently an amalgamation of problems!

Lumian planned to utilize Spirit World Traversal for a third time, returning to the surface and avoiding any danger by abandoning Beatrice's body.

While Lumian made his decision, Franca instinctively moved toward Beatrice's lifeless form, which now had a second tree-like wart.

Her right hand reached into the concealed pocket of her dress, aiming to retrieve the ancient mirror she had discovered underground.
This ancient mirror was connected to a strange and perilous mirror world. She could attempt to encase Beatrice's body within it, allowing one form of danger to counteract another!
This would buy them precious time for further deliberation. Ultimately, whether the departed believer of the Mother Tree of Desire triumphed or the enigmatic mirror world absorbed the corruption and "stilled" the mutation, it wouldn't directly impact Franca, the humans present, or the surrounding residents.
Compared to them, the inexperienced Browns Sauron's initial reaction was to incinerate the remnants of spirituality in the corpse with her black flames, freezing the emerging mutation. This was the most Demoness-like approach to disrupting the deteriorating situation.
At that very moment, Lumian and the others sensed a significant dimming of the light around them, as if the crimson moon had vanished, leaving only a few dim wall lamps.
Instinctively, Lumian turned his gaze to the window and discovered that the glass had turned pitch-black, no longer offering a view outside. It had transformed from a "window" into a sealed barrier.
Simultaneously, the formless entity that had been slowly emanating from Beatrice's body appeared lost, unable to find its path to the infinite darkness. It seemed to meander aimlessly, gradually receding.
Their mystical connection to an unknown entity dissipated. Lumian, Franca, and Browns suddenly lost the sense of being "watched" from afar and "illuminated" by unseen eyes.
Thud! Thud! Their heartbeats slowly returned to normal as they witnessed the tree-like wart on Beatrice's body wither rapidly, and no more blood boils emerged.
The darkness surrounding the corpse gradually receded, and an imperceptible object began attaching itself to the diamond necklace adorning Beatrice's corpse.
...
Beneath the crimson moonlight, the building at 23 Rue Ménier lay concealed in darkness. Every window remained void of light, with no signs of life to be found. It exuded an eerie stillness and a sense of foreboding, reminiscent of a haunted house.
Across the street, within an apartment room, an unusual and ornate mirror rested in a spotless hand.
The mirror was adorned with intricately designed black serpents

that intertwined. Each "snake" featured a large crimson eye on its head, devoid of a mouth or fangs.
In that precise moment, the mirror's surface remained crystal clear, revealing a well-lit scene.
Gas wall lamps emitted a warm, yellowish radiance from the windows on every floor of the building, where various domestic scenes played out.
The elderly guard on the first floor smoked a cigarette butt he had collected and leaned against the lobby wall, savoring the tranquility of the night. On the second floor, a couple occupied the living room, one engrossed in a novel, the other unfolding a newspaper in front of them. Near an ajar window on the third floor, a half-naked man kept a cautious eye on the door, ready to make a hasty escape to the street at any moment...
Meanwhile, on the fourth floor, Lumian, Franca, and Browns found themselves perplexed. One contemplated using his abilities to discern an escape route from the "crime scene," while another delved into a concealed pocket with her right hand, seemingly searching for something. The third member appeared to have a premonition and distanced themselves from the other two.
Another spotless hand extended and lightly grazed the peculiar mirror, encircled by the one-eyed "snakes."
In an instant, the well-lit building disappeared from the mirror's surface, and the silent, gloomy apartment at 23 Rue Ménier began to illuminate one by one. Figures were reflected one after another, and distant sounds could be heard.
...
Lumian surveyed the room and realized that Adaina's apartment had returned to its usual state. The unsettling anomalies, like the impenetrable darkness and the strange glass windows, had all dissipated.
Beatrice Incourt's corpse had reverted to its original form, and the horrific transformation now felt like a mere nightmare.
Lumian, who had been ready to whisk Franca away at a moment's notice, relaxed somewhat and exchanged a look with Browns Sauron.
The Demoness Sect won't just send such an inexperienced member to investigate Franca...
Had one of the powerful Demonesses, who had been covertly observing the situation, intervened to help resolve any potential anomalies?
This behavior doesn't seem characteristic of a Mid-Sequence Beyonder. A high-level Demoness, or a Sequence 5 Demoness of Affliction wielding a godhood item?

No wonder Browns had entered so openly, seemingly unconcerned about potential attacks from me and Franca.
I wonder if the hidden Demoness had seen my Spell of Harrumph...
Franca shared a similar thought. She diverted her attention from the window and regarded Browns Sauron.
She expressed her guess calmly but didn't inquire further. She looked down at Beatrice's corpse and asked with curiosity and confusion, "The necklace appears to have changed."
Lumian also noticed this transformation. The transparent diamond on the necklace seemed to reflect the light from the gas wall lamp in a captivating manner, causing his heart to race and his mouth to go dry.
Could it have become a Beyonder weapon similar to Fallen Mercury? Had the previous boons returned to their source because there were no abnormalities? Lumian formed a rough conjecture.
He approached the corpse and knelt down cautiously.
As he reached out to touch the necklace, a multitude of desires surged uncontrollably, making him quickly retract his hand, shivering from the bloodlust.
With items like Flog and a host of contractual negative effects, he was no longer suitable for contact with the necklace, which had the power to awaken the deepest desires.
"You handle it," Lumian said, standing up and gesturing for Franca to take care of the necklace.
Franca accepted the task without hesitation and carefully removed the diamond necklace with anticipation.
Without further delay, the two of them bid farewell to Browns and made their way back to the market district.
...
Avenue du Marché.
Franca had successfully dealt with Beatrice and stood a chance of passing the Demonesses' audit. She had also acquired a Beyonder item that complemented the abilities of the Demoness of Pleasure.
Her good mood was evident, and she almost hummed a tune to express her positive feelings.
She glanced at Lumian, who walked beside her in silence.
"What's on your mind?"
"I'm wondering where Maipú Meyer might be hiding..." Lumian replied, his tone serious. "Let's go underground now."
Franca was taken aback for a moment but quickly understood Lumian's thoughts.
"Do you think Maipú Meyer might return to the place where Susanna Mattise once conducted the sacrifice to the Tree of

Shadow?"
"Perhaps." Lumian wasn't entirely certain, but he felt there might be some clues or traces left behind.
Franca, feeling confident in her gains from the spoils of war, didn't attempt to dissuade him. Together with Lumian, they entered Underground Trier from the Avenue du Marché entrance.
Using a fireball for illumination, they navigated a relatively familiar path, passing by the collapsed mine where Rentas, a member of the Bliss Society, had been buried and the location where Jenna had been drugged. They ventured deeper into the altar area, a place they had previously avoided.
The area was marked with scorching signs, devoid of any living creatures or the malevolent aura that once lingered. It was as if it had been exposed to intense sunlight for days, leaving behind only piles of withered bones from various creatures.
The cave's collapses and crevices had been filled with soil and rocks. Lumian examined the area carefully and noticed fresh marks around the original altar.
These marks clearly didn't belong to the same person and came from different "visitors."
As Lumian examined the marks and the deep-rooted cave-ins, memories of the Tree of Shadow, the Samaritan Women's Spring, and the Iron and Blood Cross Order's conspiracy flooded his mind.
These seemingly disparate elements all pointed to one thing: They, directly or indirectly, pointed to the underground, to the hidden histories and perils lurking beneath Trier.

Chapter 421: Abnormal Silence

Franca also noticed the footprints and traces. After carefully observing them for a while, she remarked, "At least four people have come together in the past two weeks..."

"Maipú Meyer has accomplices?"

Lumian gazed at the collapse that had been filled in and pondered for a moment before saying, "What's more important isn't whether they have accomplices, but what they're doing here.

"If it's truly Maipú Meyer and not a random team of cave explorers, he long knew that this place had been destroyed by the official Beyonders. There wouldn't be anything valuable left behind. Why did he bring people here recently? To pay homage?"

"It's not impossible," Franca muttered. "What if he achieved something and received a new boon from the Mother Tree of Desire, becoming a Fallen Tree Spirit?

"It's also known as Baby Cupid. There must be a distorted desire in affairs of the heart, just like Susanna Mattise did with Charlie. Therefore, Maipú Meyer coming specially to pay homage to his deceased love fits the characteristics of the pathway."

"But there's no need to bring three or four people to watch him perform, right?" Lumian surveyed his surroundings. "Perhaps he didn't do it on purpose but just happened to pass by?"

Franca quickly caught Lumian's drift.

"Are you suggesting that Maipú Meyer and his accomplices frequent the underground of the market district?"

Lumian offered a curt acknowledgment.

"I now believe that Maipú Meyer didn't return to the market district to deal with me. He might eventually seek revenge, but that's the outcome, not the process."

"Is their target something underground in the market district?" Franca frowned. "But the Tree of Shadow is severely damaged. What's so special about this place? It can't be that the entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier is beneath the market district..."

Franca stopped abruptly.

That wasn't impossible!

Lumian quickly recalled the situation in the market district and various rumors he knew. Suddenly, he recalled something.

Madam Magician's "doll" messenger had a strong aversion to Salle de Bal Brise, claiming that old bones were buried beneath the area.

This had to refer to a unique situation beneath the market district.

Moreover, the building facing Salle de Bal Brise was suspected to be related to Église Saint-Robert's old cemetery.

Lumian promptly shared this insight with Franca before they

continued following the traces out of the destroyed sacrificial mine.
"There's really a problem... It's not hard to figure out. Summon that messenger later and ask," Franca remarked, bemoaning the poor fengshui in the market district. She followed Lumian, providing mysticism support for his pursuit.
The two of them journeyed deeper underground, but they eventually lost the trail of their target. The suspected members of Maipú Meyer's group had traversed several well-known and long-used tunnels frequented by cave explorers, smuggling caravans, and mushroom-growing citizens. Their tracks had been effectively concealed by those who came later after more than ten days.
Lumian, with a crimson fireball above him, came to a halt and stared into the pitch-black mine ahead. He remained silent for an extended moment, his thoughts shrouded in mystery.
Franca was about to suggest leaving when Lumian suddenly spoke. "Don't you think the market district has been unusually quiet for the past month or so?"
"How do you mean quiet?" Franca retorted involuntarily.
007 certainly didn't think so!
Lumian pondered his words and continued, "Let me put it another way. Apart from the Beyonder problem we caused, isn't the market district oddly quiet regarding mysticism incidents?
"No, to be more precise, after the Tree of Shadow was severely damaged, the heretics have become extremely inactive!
"Right, no new factions have emerged to devour the remaining smaller mobs, or to engage in conflicts with the Savoie Mob. There have been no suspected sacrificial cases. Even among those that preach secretly, I only encountered a swindler from the Sick Church, and he was just an ordinary person..."
Since the Tree of Shadow incident, the only true heretics Lumian and Franca had encountered were Guillaume Bénet from the Sinners organization and Beatrice Incourt of the Bliss Society. However, they had followed a trail based on former clues which weren't within the market district.
The Rose School of Thought's Werewolf could barely be considered one, but that was an aftermath of the Tree of Shadow incident.
Browns Sauron of the Demoness Sect could only be considered half an element. This organization had a solid history and believed in the evil entity of this world, not alien evil gods."
Franca was taken aback.
"Isn't that normal? Secret organizations that believe in evil gods must operate in secret. If they were encountered by someone like you every day, they would have been wiped out long ago!

"Look, we didn't notice Maipú Meyer returning to the market district before."
If it were anyone else, your explanation wouldn't be a problem, but I have an alien evil god's angel sealed within me. According to Madam Magician's rubbish repulsion convergence theory, there must be an abnormal reason why I haven't encountered a heretic causing trouble for so long... Termiboros has been excessively quiet recently... Lumian's thoughts raced as he said to Franca, "Can you use dream divination on me to help me remember something?"
"No. Perhaps a powerful Seer can, but not me." Franca shook her head. "*What do you want to recall?* You can seek Madame Hela's help. She can definitely create a real dreamscape now."
Lumian nodded slowly and responded, "I'd like to recall an address where suspected heretics reside. I plan to check it out and see if they've vanished, gone into hiding, or fallen silent. Yes, there's no need to trouble Madame Hela for the time being. I know who to ask."
This was him carefully making confirmation built upon bold assumptions.
Seeing Lumian return to the surface as he spoke, Franca hurriedly asked, "What address? Who are you asking?"
"We'll talk later. Let's head to Rue de Scotch Broom in Quartier de Noel first," Lumian said without turning around.
Why does this address sound so familiar... Franca mused for a moment as she followed closely behind.
As she neared the surface, she finally remembered.
Madame Pualis's address!
Madame Night from Cordu!
...
Quartier de Noël, Rue de Scotch Broom.
This suburban area was filled with villa-like buildings, each with a lawn facing the street and a garden at the back.
Lumian walked in the shadows where the street lamps couldn't reach, carefully inspecting the lawns and gardens of each building. Franca did the same. Without knowing Madame Pualis's house number, they had to rely on the unusually vigorous and lively plants to make a judgment.
As they approached the end of the street, Lumian and Franca simultaneously noticed a garden filled with blooming flowers, resembling a lush forest of plants.
The grayish-white building housing the garden appeared unlit, slumbering in the darkness, in stark contrast to the surrounding residences filled with family life.
"It feels like no one has lived here for a long time..." Franca began

to understand Lumian's concerns. "Has Madame Pualis, a member of the Nightstalkers, also moved out and hidden herself quietly?"
Lumian observed and listened for a while to confirm that the building was empty. He then took out a piece of wire, opened the door, and entered.
During this process, Franca used Magic Mirror Divination to confirm via mysticism means.
The living room was devoid of furnishings, the linen long gone. Dust had gathered on the table, indicating that no one had lived there in some time.
Lumian proceeded further into the house, and Franca followed him cautiously, not daring to near or touch anything.
Upon reaching the coffee table, Lumian bent down and picked up an abandoned newspaper. Although it was tattered from rat bites, there were still some remnants left.
Lumian examined the newspaper under the moonlight and whispered, "Early July... This means that Madame Pualis didn't leave immediately after I got the address out from Louis Lund, nor did she depart immediately after the Tree of Shadow incident. She resided on Rue de Scotch Broom for a while and chose to abandon this place for unknown reasons."
"Something is indeed amiss," Franca noted with a grave expression.
They quickly searched the building and then boarded a rental carriage to their next destination.
Upon receiving an old newspaper advertising the Interstellar Bridge from Laurent, the former tenant of Auberge du Coq Doré and now deputy editor of Le Petit Trierien, Lumian and Franca arrived at 9 Rue Saint-Martin in Quartier 2.
The fifth floor was an office rented by a group of swindlers and suspected heretics. They aimed to raise funds for constructing an interstellar bridge to the crimson moon.
Under the dim starlight, the entire fifth floor lay shrouded in darkness.
Lumian cautiously reached out and pushed open the door to the apartment-like office.
Crimson moonlight filtered through the window, revealing scattered papers on the ground. Complex mechanical symbols and intricate bridge diagrams displayed concepts that appeared both imaginative and plausible.
Many of the drawers were open, devoid of any belongings, as if the swindlers had hastily retreated upon realizing the arrival of the police.
Based on the written information and various traces at the scene,

Lumian and Franca concluded that this floor had been vacant for nearly two weeks.
"There's definitely something unusual," Franca remarked. "Why have the heretics from various organizations suddenly reduced their activities, hidden themselves, and gone quiet?"
Lumian's expression grew solemn as he said in a deep voice, "This abnormality suggests that something significant might be in the works."
Without waiting for Franca's response, he instructed her, "Contact 007 and inquire about any information regarding the Sick Church. Also, find out what problems might be lurking in Église Saint-Robert's old cemetery.
"I'll write a letter to Madam Magician and share our findings and speculations."
He planned to also ask the "doll" messenger about the meaning of the old bones.
"Alright," Franca responded promptly.
...
Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.
Lumian set up the ritual and summoned the "doll" messenger donning a light-gold dress.
As he handed the folded letter to her, he managed a smile and inquired, "What did you mean by the old bones underground?"
The "doll" messenger displayed a disgusted expression.
"Filthy, repulsive old bones from the Fourth Epoch!"

Chapter 422: Formula

Old bones from the Fourth Epoch... Lumian disregarded the doll messenger's emotional descriptions and focused on extracting the essential information.

But this didn't provide a deeper insight compared to what he already knew. After all, most of Trier's underground issues had their roots in the Fourth Epoch.

Lumian took a moment to ponder and inquired, "Where does it come from? How do the old bones look like?"

The messenger responded angrily, "I've never seen them before! Their aura alone is so repulsive, disgusting, and filthy!"

So, you're not entirely sure of the situation either... Lumian decided not to press the "doll" messenger further and observed as she vanished, carrying the neatly folded letter.

Only then, as Lumian awaited Madam Magician's response, did he have the opportunity to assess his gains from the night.

A vial of truth serum, a vial of Bliss Society sedatives, a vial of Mysticism Smelling Salts, and 1,500 verl d'or.

...

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

"So late? I thought you'd resolve it quickly." Jenna, clad in a light cotton dress, stood up and greeted Franca upon her return.

She believed that Franca and Ciel had a high chance of winning, even if they encountered a Fallen Tree Spirit!

Franca muttered, "We ran into an accident. Uh, just a moment."

Franca looked at Jenna with a serious expression.

"What's wrong?" Jenna sensed something was amiss.

Franca walked to her side and examined her pupils.

There were no signs of her wearing blue contact lenses!

"Phew..." Franca let out a sigh of relief and said, "In the future, we need to continuously verify if we're Actors in disguise."

Actors of the Mother Tree of Desire pathway couldn't alter their bodies or fundamentally change their appearances like Faceless. They relied more on makeup items and various props.

Among these, the color of the eyes was the most challenging for Actors to mimic. They had to use external objects. They could prevent Actors from infiltrating their ranks by checking if anyone around them was wearing colored contact lenses.

Of course, this wasn't foolproof. They could always find actors with the same eye color as the target to act.

In the current situation, Maipú Meyer's eyes were dark brown, Jenna's were blue, and Lumian's were the same. Franca's were a lighter shade, more akin to the blue of a serene lake. For the time

being, they had no reason to worry about being impersonated by the former manager of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. Maipú Meyer had distanced himself from the Bliss Society, and he couldn't recruit a new Actor anytime soon.
The only person they needed to be concerned about was Anthony Reid, who also had a pair of dark brown eyes.
As an acting apprentice at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, Jenna was particularly attuned to the Bliss Society's activities. She instantly became alert and scrutinized Franca's eyes, fear in her voice as she asked, "Are they targeting the market district again?"
"It's Maipú Meyer. He's back in the market district. We don't know where he's hiding," Franca replied without reservation, recounting the entire incident.
Of the Bliss Society members, the only one Jenna was familiar with was Maipú Meyer. She had a deep-seated fear of him because he had once been her manager and could influence her future.
Unconsciously, she touched the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty concealed in her pocket and nodded solemnly, saying, "I'll be cautious."
Franca didn't offer any additional information. She glanced at the wall clock and retreated to her room. She activated the radio transceiver and prepared to contact 007.
Before long, she used the mechanical typewriter and analyzer to send a telegram.
"007, paging 007!"
Within 20 to 30 seconds, a telegram produced by a machine appeared.
"Hidden Blade, don't do this to me. I'm scared. What's going on now?"
"This could be a significant problem!" Franca honestly warned 007.
"Bro, before I disclose the exact situation, help me gather some information. I need to confirm two things: First, if there have been any developments related to the Malady God faith in Quartier du Jardin Botanique, specifically on Rue Pasteur and Rue Evelyn. Second, what lies deep beneath the old cemetery of Église Saint-Robert?"
After a brief pause, a new telegram arrived.
"I'm off-duty tonight, seriously! And now I have to go back to work overtime!
"Give me half an hour to an hour."
Franca replied: "No problem." As she conversed with other members of the telegram group, she retrieved the diamond necklace she had acquired from Beatrice Incourt and used various methods to assess the Beyonder accessory's capabilities and

adverse effects.
The diamond corresponds to a total of five desires: lust, appetite, lust, acting, and fulfillment...
It doesn't seem to have many uses. Usage of each desire shouldn't exceed two...
With it on, I seem to be better at acting and makeup...
I'll just keep it in my pocket. Without it coming into direct contact with my skin or flesh, there won't be any negative effects...
After wearing it, I'll become more excited than usual, and my various desires will significantly increase. If I encounter Beyonders with similar abilities, I'll be effectively restrained and even suffer a huge loss...
Among them, the most intense desire is the desire for recognition...
Yes, this thing can't be used against Beyonders of the Mother Tree of Desire pathway. Its weakness lies in their strengths...
What should I call it? The Seven Emotions and Six Desires Pendant? Uh, the style doesn't seem right. Forget it, I'll call it Beatrice's Necklace. It's simple, convenient, and clear!
007's response arrived faster than Franca had anticipated. In less than half an hour, he provided the relevant information.
"According to the heretic database shared by various official factions, the Malady God's envoy hasn't been located. He appears to have sensed danger in advance and hasn't resurfaced.
"The situation at Église Saint-Robert's old cemetery is extremely classified. I can't investigate it for the time being."
Extremely classified? Franca inwardly hissed and relayed to 007 the eerie quietness from organizations devoted to evil gods.
...
Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré.
Madam Magician's slow response arrived after an hour of waiting:
"After the death of a bestowed, the return of power to the source is deducible, but typically, you wouldn't be able to sense it.
"This time, it was due to your wearing the Flog boxing gloves. They are made from the Tree of Shadow and are closely related to the one that the Bliss Society believes in, the source of the boon powers. Therefore, when Beatrice's boon power returned and the connection was strengthened, that entity indirectly noticed you and the Two of Cups, which caused the corpse to exhibit an abnormality. This abnormality allowed the flow of the boon power to become visible.
"To retain the boon power and prevent it from returning, you require the corresponding ability or a unique environment. Sometimes, these two elements are one and the same. In simple

terms, you need to advance to Sequence 4 and become a demigod or obtain something at this level. Only then can you have a chance of preserving the remaining boon's power and forming a Beyonder item. Of course, in specific underground environments, such as near the Samaritan Women's Spring, you can achieve this without a high Sequence."
Lumian now had a clear understanding of the anomaly of the night.
Unlike his previous killings of members of the Bliss Society, he now possessed the Flog boxing gloves, bringing about a different development.
The use of the Flog boxing gloves attracted the attention of hidden entities to begin with, and its connection to the Mother Tree of Desire through Beatrice's belief had influenced the return of boon power, causing the abnormality.
Understanding the situation and how to prevent it in the future, Lumian continued reading Madam Magician's reply.
"We have already noticed Trier's anomaly and are monitoring one of the leads. However, it is unclear when we will find any answers. What we can say for certain is that changes will occur, with a timeframe ranging from as short as two months to as long as half a year.
"I cannot provide a definitive answer regarding what lies beneath Salle de Bal Brise as it is challenging for me to approach. All I can tell you is that it is certainly more than just the corruption left behind by Blood Emperor Alista Tudor.
"Don't dwell too much on this matter. It is beyond your capabilities to handle. Your focus should be on accumulating strength and biding your time."
Accumulate strength and bide my time... Lumian repeated these words to himself as he absorbed the advice.
The next morning, Lumian had a conversation with Franca and Jenna. Afterward, he gathered all his funds and went directly to 11 Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.
"Boss, here are 30,000 gold and 30,000 verl d'or banknotes," Lumian said with a smile as he placed the heavy leather bag on Gardner Martin's desk.
He still had 1,000 gold and nominal funds of 1,500 verl d'or.
Gardner Martin glanced at Lumian, unzipped the bag, and began counting the money.
He didn't inquire about Lumian's remaining funds. With a smile, he retrieved a faux goatskin that appeared to have been prepared in advance.
"You need to promise two things. First, memorize this formula

before burning the piece of paper. Second, you cannot resell the Conspirer potion formula without my or the Supervisor's permission," Gardner Martin stated these terms without requesting a notarized pledge, as if issuing an order.
Lumian agreed to these terms without hesitation, saying, "No problem."
Gardner Martin nodded in satisfaction and handed over the faux goatskin to Lumian.
Lumian took it and began reading:
"Conspirer potion formula:
"Main ingredient: Black Hunting Spider's composite eye, Sphinx's brain;
"Supplementary ingredients: One Black Hunting Spider's poison gland, 80 milliliters of Sphinx blood, 10 grams of amber powder, and two white oak fruits."
After reading and memorizing the formula, Lumian's right hand trembled, allowing the crimson flames to engulf the faux goatskin.
...
Time passed in an eerie silence. Unbeknownst to them, the heat in Trier began to wane, and the temperature gradually dropped.
One mid-September day, Franca stood before the window of Apartment 601 and cursed Browns Sauron for what felt like the hundredth time.
She had already passed the Demoness Sect's audit and informed Browns that she had joined the Savoie Mob to infiltrate the Iron and Blood Cross Order. However, she never anticipated there would be an assessment period. Only after this evaluation could she officially become a member of the Demoness Sect.
Her current liaison, Browns Sauron, used this as an excuse to prevent her from participating in the Red House Café's female orgies. This left her with no option but to endure tormenting Gardner Martin and his lovers for the past month or so.
Franca turned her attention to Jenna, who appeared lost in thought, and couldn't help but sigh at her companion's fortune.
The Demoness Sect remained oblivious to Jenna's true identity as a Beyonder of the Assassin pathway.
"What's troubling you?" Franca inquired.
Jenna responded with a hint of distress, "My Instigator potion has completely digested."
Franca exclaimed in pleasant surprise, "That's a good thing!"
Jenna scratched her head and let out a sigh. "I haven't even paid you back for the money I owe you, and now I have to consider the Witch potion formula and its ingredients. Dammit, why does it feel like the more I advance, the poorer I become?"

Chapter 423: Unexpected Encounter

Franca chuckled at Jenna's complaint and replied, "That's typical. As long as you master the acting method, progress comes quickly before reaching the mid Sequences. The pace at which you save money often falls short of the expenses for purchasing the potion formula and the necessary ingredients.

"Don't fret about the money. Sequence 7 in the Assassin pathway is a game-changer. It significantly boosts your combat prowess and survival skills. You're aware of the potential catastrophe on the horizon. Only by becoming a Witch and wielding the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty will you stand a chance at survival and protecting the people you care about."

Jenna fell silent for a moment, then she swore, "You instigated me without using your abilities!"

"Haha, it's just the way things are. I'll share the Witch potion formula with you now. Let's start gathering," Franca said as she returned to the coffee table, spread out a piece of paper, and swiftly jotted down the instructions.

Jenna stood beside her, examining the Intisian words taking shape.

Meanwhile, Jenna silently tallied her debts.

Including the Purifier reward and the earnings from my underground singing, I've saved nearly 10,000 verl d'or.

According to Franca and Ciel, a Sequence 7 potion formula can go for between 30,000 and 40,000 verl d'or, depending on its rarity. At the very least, I owe Franca another 30,000 verl d'or, bringing the total to 60,000...

Even if I sell the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty, I won't be able to make up for it. In the future, I'll have to purchase various ingredients for the Witch potion, costing me over 30,000 verl d'or... Dammit! It's no wonder why so many Beyonders at those mysticism gatherings seem strapped for cash and penny-pinching!

The more Jenna calculated, the more her head throbbed.

If it weren't for the potion's tangible transformation and the clear, visible abilities it grants, she would have suspected she'd fallen into a scam. *Why did her debts keep increasing as she worked harder?*

In the past, her whole family had often felt hopeless when dealing with a debt of a few thousand verl d'or. But now, she owed Franca 60,000, and there was no end in sight.

Even with her cash and assets, she still fell short by 10,000 verl d'or.

Gritting her teeth, Jenna decided to put these worries aside for

now and deal with them after advancing to Sequence 7 as a Witch.
Franca quickly finished writing down the Witch potion formula:
"Sequence 7: Witch;
"Main ingredient: Every drop of an Abyss Demonic Fish's blood and an Agate Peacock's egg;
"Supplementary ingredients: 80 ml of purified water, five drops of Jimsonweed juice, 3 scales of a Shadow Lizard, and 10 drops of Daffodil Juice."
She handed the paper with the formula to Jenna and added in thought, "Avoid gathering these materials at the mysticism gathering we attend. Acquire them from the gathering you discovered and joined, as well as from the Purifiers. Oh, ask Ciel for assistance too."
Franca was still in the Demoness Sect's assessment period and worried about potential spies from the secret organization in the mysticism gatherings. If participants gathered the ingredients for the Witch potion, it could raise suspicions.
In contrast, the Purifiers were a more secure source of these ingredients, given their history of dealing with Demonesses. They definitely had the corresponding characteristics in reserve.
Of course, Franca would also help inquire and gather information at the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, but she couldn't inform Jenna about it.
"Alright." Jenna rwas well aware of the Demoness Sect's hostility toward wild Assassins like her.
As Jenna memorized the Witch potion formula, Franca inquired with concern, "Has your brother left Trier?"
Recognizing that the heretics were oddly quiet and them receiving confirmation from a Major Arcana card holder, Lumian and Franca had suggested that Jenna and her brother Julien relocate from Trier to another city in Intis for six months to monitor the situation.
Jenna had insisted on staying to spend time with her comrades and had promised to advance her Sequence quickly.
This was the primary reason she had accepted Franca's gift without hesitation.
As for her brother Julien, Jenna genuinely wanted to keep him away from another mysticism disaster. She wanted him to live a safe and happy life, and she had been busy instigating him to leave Trier.
Jenna couldn't help but smile. "I went to Port LeSeur last weekend."
Port LeSeur, situated at the estuary of the Srenzo River, was one of Trier's primary ports for shipping goods out to sea.
Franca was surprised and pleased for her friend.

"Did you manage to instigate that stubborn fellow?"
Without divulging the truth,Jenna shook her head and said, "No. I shifted my instigation efforts to a different target. I discovered that the shipyard where Julien works has a branch in Port LeSeur, so I used my Instigation ability to convince their supervisor to propose a six-month technical exchange program between the factories. I also paid to include Julien in the list.
"I only digested the potion after successfully instigating this. Dogsh*t, no matter what I told Julien, he refused to listen. He even reneged on his word the next day after the Instigation. As soon as his supervisor issued the order, he started packing!"
After venting her frustration about her brother, Jenna glanced at Franca and added with a sly grin,
"The skilled workers from Trier arrived in Port LeSeur last weekend. The return leg from LeSeur to Trier will be half a year later to avoid the potential disaster.
"Franca, why don't we figure out a way to get more people to leave Trier and lay low for a while?"
"They won't believe us even if we tell them," Franca sighed. "Moreover, if more people leave, those evil god organizations might sense it and act prematurely. If the official Beyonders aren't prepared, it could lead to more casualties."
Unspoken was the fact that, combined with Madam Judgment's words and Ciel's intel, the surface Trier served to seal the underground Trier. Everyone in the city contributed their strength, and if too many left, the seal might weaken, putting the remaining citizens in danger.
Jenna fell silent for a moment, choosing not to dwell on the topic.
Her upbringing and six months of experience had taught her to accept the harsh reality. All she could do was save as many as she could within reasonable bounds.
After a pause of about ten seconds, Jenna said thoughtfully, "When I Instigated the supervisor to propose the exchange program, I noticed that many neighboring factories had similar arrangements. That's why I had an example to raise and succeeded without much difficulty.
"Now that I think about it, could it be a covert effort by official Beyonders to reduce the population in the market district?"
"It's certainly possible," Franca considered for a moment before hesitating to add more.
What she wanted to say was that it might also be orchestrated by the Tarot Club or Church of The Fool. Madam Justice, a Major Arcana card in the Spectator domain, was well-suited for such matters.

Franca refrained from saying this because she hadn't yet told Jenna about her and Ciel's belief in Mr. Fool.
She had initially planned to "visit" The Fool's cathedral at Lavigny Docks with Jenna, but she dared not do so once she came under the scrutiny of the Demoness Sect.
Yes, I'll have to get Ciel to take Jenna to Lavigny Docks. If she embraces the faith of Mr. Fool, she'll be safer in the future... Franca's thoughts drifted to Lumian.
...
In a four-wheeled four-seater carriage, navigating through the forest and farmland, Lumian, dressed in a casual formal suit, looked out the window at the golden harvest, his mind drifting.
The past month had been his most leisurely period in the past six months, but he didn't find this leisure enjoyable. He seized every opportunity to digest the Pyromaniac potion.
This included visits to the large morgue in the island district to help "cremate" corpses, "bury" abandoned large-sized trash, venturing underground to use flames to intimidate passing smuggling teams, successfully securing insurance compensation for small distressed merchants through fires, tracking down and incinerating a few wanted criminals, and igniting a desire among many to leave Trier and explore opportunities in neighboring cities...
This string of actions had brought Lumian to the brink of fully digesting the Pyromaniac potion. It might only take another half a month, a week, or perhaps even less.
Today, Lumian had received an invitation from Count Poufer to visit his Red Swan Castle as a guest.
Over the past month, the Sauron family had hosted five gatherings —one at the castle, one for hunting, two for casual chats at a café, and one for a masquerade ball in an abandoned house.
Lumian had participated in all of them, but nothing significant had occurred. The only notable exception was that Poufer Sauron hadn't played King's Pie again.
Where's the probe Gardner Martin mentioned? *Could it be a probe this time?* The Cave Association hasn't made another appearance. Do they believe me? He redirected his thoughts from the near-harvest farmland and contemplated the invitation for the day.
What intrigued him even more was Gardner Martin's promise to secretly monitor every gathering hosted by Count Poufer. So, where might Gardner be concealed at this moment?
Under the afternoon sun, the carriage arrived at its destination.
Lumian gazed up at the beige castle, tainted with the stains of ancient blood. Passing through the imposing door and the vast

atrium, he reached the elegant living room on the first floor, adorned with a dark-red, plush carpet.
Poufer Sauron, dressed in a red velvet coat, was engaged in conversation at the entrance with another guest when Lumian arrived.
Lumian's gaze froze.
The guest standing beside Count Poufer was not someone he had expected to see.
Clad in hunting attire, with what appeared to be reddish-dyed hair, sharp brown eyebrows, and piercing eyes, it was Albus, another member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
As a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order under the command of Commanding Officer Gardner Martin, Lumian was well aware of their identities and objectives. However, Albus was enigmatic and seldom seen in the market district, only making appearances at gatherings for a free meal.
"Who is this?" Lumian didn't conceal his confusion.
Is he here to assist me in completing my mission?
Poufer Sauron introduced with a smile, "A new friend. He'll be joining us at our gatherings more frequently."
At this point, Poufer turned to Albus, whose expression appeared rather unlikable, maintaining his smile.
"His full name is: Albus Medici."

Chapter 424: Underground Maze

Albus Medici... Lumian repeated the name to himself, glancing at the member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order who had suddenly appeared.

During Gardner Martin's gathering, Albus had never revealed his last name, and Gardner Martin had never introduced him. Now, he had actually given his full name to Poufer Sauron.

Is he trying to make it more realistic? Lumian's gaze swept across Albus's face, and he realized that when Count Poufer mentioned the surname Medici, he didn't hide his mockery at all, as if mocking the Sauron family member.

"Ciel Dubois," Lumian extended his right hand and politely introduced himself.

Albus casually shook his hand, a smile evident in his eyes.

He said, "I've heard your name before, a generous patron of art."

The member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order emphasized "generous."

"That's mainly thanks to my sponsor," Lumian said with a double entendre.

In the ears of the other guests, he was referring to his father—his wealthy family. As a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, Albus caught the subtle message.

Poufer Sauron exchanged a few pleasantries with Lumian before escorting him to the sofa.

The gathering was intimate, with familiar faces all around, including Poufer's cousin, Elros, Novelist Anori, Painter Mullen, Critic Ernst Young, and Poet Iraeta.

After some casual conversation and nibbling on snacks accompanied by black tea, Count Poufer glanced around and suggested with a mischievous smile, "How about we embark on an adventure today?"

"Adventure?" Albus raised an eyebrow and couldn't resist a playful quip, "An adventure in the bedroom?"

His insinuation was clear. Red Swan Castle might be spacious, with room for a key family member and even hundreds of soldiers at its zenith, but it hardly seemed like a place fit for adventure. Were they supposed to reenact a Trier-like adventure under a bedroom's plush sheets?

The jest lightened the atmosphere, and Poufer Sauron cleared his throat before continuing,

"Perhaps you're unaware, but Red Swan Castle harbors an extensive underground area.

"In the era of its construction, its primary function was war. It had

to boast a cavernous cellar and a tunnel for escape during dire situations, or it would be deemed inadequate.
"Throughout the centuries, my forebears expanded and modified the underground, turning it into a labyrinth resembling something out of a horror story. Even though I grew up in Red Swan Castle, my knowledge of that place is limited to the areas I frequently use.
"Our objective today is to venture deep into this subterranean maze and locate a Count's crown that one of my ancestors misplaced in one of its chambers. The crown is adorned with numerous rubies, making it easily distinguishable.
"The one who retrieves the Count's crown will be crowned today's king."
Deep into the underground maze... Scenes suddenly flashed through Lumian's mind.
The constant self-mutilating people in Red Swan Castle...
Screams of unknown origin...
A bronze coffin, surrounded by countless white candles...
A palm with dark-red, nearly-black blood vessels...
And a withered, black heart with a trickle of crimson seeping out...
These latter objects seemed to be concealed somewhere in the depths of the underground hall!
In an instant, Lumian comprehended the gravity of Poufer Sauron's proposal.
Poufer Sauron's probing was here!
Suppressing the urge to scan his surroundings and possibly catch a glimpse of Gardner Martin, who might be lurking, Lumian turned his attention to Albus Medici.
The member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order clicked his tongue and chuckled.
"Sounds intriguing. This is a game for the courageous!"
As if to quell any doubts or reluctance among the group, doing so meant: Those who decline to participate are merely cowards!
Count Poufer seized the opportunity to reassure them, "Worry not. If you lose your way and cannot find your path back, just pull the bell rope in your chamber. The servants will be dispatched to search for you and bring you back from below."
"No problem," Anori, the short and plump novelist, quipped with a mischievous glint in his eye. "I'm quite looking forward to something happening. After all, it will provide me with excellent material for my writing."
"Like Anori's Last Day?" Lumian joked.
Having attended numerous gatherings hosted by the Black Cat art organization, Lumian was well aware of Novelist Anori and Poet

Iraeta's unique quirks. Anori had a taboo for never praising fellow authors, while Iraeta's ire was only stirred by the current social realities in Intis.
Anori took a sip of his black tea and mumbled, "Those old fogeys from the Intis Faculty of Arts will absolutely love this theme."
Seeing no objections, Count Poufer rose from his seat and addressed the assembled guests,
"Let's divide into two groups and begin this adventure. We'll set out individually along the way.
"One group will follow me, and the other will accompany Ciel. These individuals have all been kings in the past three months.
"Those willing to join Ciel, raise your hands."
"Me!" Albus Medici was the first to raise his hand. Lumian had expected him to follow Poufer Sauron closely to complete the Iron and Blood Cross Order's mission.
Count Poufer appeared unfazed, as if this was the anticipated course of events.
The second to raise her hand was Elros, the cousin of the host.
With her long auburn hair, soft features, and bright brown eyes, she smiled at Lumian and said, "I've always been Monsieur Ciel's companion in the past. I see no reason to change that now."
Lumian nodded and returned her smile.
He was aware that beneath her youthful appearance, Elros possessed a complexity that belied her innocence.
In one of his unsettling dreams, most participants in the King's Pie game had descended into madness, inflicting self-harm or harm on others. Only three individuals remained unaffected: Lumian himself, Poufer Sauron, and Miss Elros.
Lumian couldn't help but wonder about her true motivations for choosing to accompany him into the underground maze.
The third to raise his hand was the poet, Iraeta.
Holding his cherrywood pipe, he offered a straightforward reason, "He's my sponsor!"
The remaining guests, including Novelist Anori, Painter Mullen, and Critic Ernst Young, formed a team with Poufer Sauron.
They left the comfort of the living room and found themselves standing next to a fully-armored statue. Descending the nearby stairs, designed for two people to walk side by side, they ventured further into the depths of the castle.
The walls of the staircase were mottled and grayish-white, winding their way down into the bowels of the earth. The surroundings grew increasingly quiet as they descended.
After traversing about three floors, Lumian and his group reached the entrance of the underground maze.

The passageways were illuminated by numerous wall lamps, some connected to gas pipes, while others had a more classical design with candles burning brightly.
Lumian gazed up at the ceiling and noticed the aqueous-black stone bricks above, shrouded in darkness. Their cracks were distinct, and the surface exhibited signs of peeling.
"Let's choose this one," Poufer declared, taking a carbide lamp from the wall and leading his team down the leftmost passageway.
After setting up the carbide lamp, Lumian instinctively proceeded down the corridor ahead without hesitation.
He believed that in such an environment, methodical searching might cause them to overlook something significant. By relying on the convergence of Beyonder characteristics and the concealed Blood Emperor aura, he believed he would stumble upon something of value.
"What's your reason for choosing this path?" Albus Medici's expression was always a little annoying.
Lumian responded with a hint of nonchalance, "I have faith in fate."
"I like that reason," Elros chimed in with a faint smile.
Poet Iraeta took a puff from his cherrywood pipe and added, "I believe in it too, but only if fate is inclined to favor me."
The quartet ventured deeper into the corridor, encountering what appeared to be storage rooms along the way.
Soon, they arrived at a dimly lit hall with three doors, each bearing a single word in ancient Feysac: Hope, Death, and Madness.
Lumian had abandoned deep thinking by this point. Without hesitation, he walked towards the Door of Madness and gently pushed it open.
As the door swung ajar, darkness enveloped the room, and the light from the carbide lamp spilled in, revealing an eerie sight. Lifelike wax statues stood throughout the room, both men and women, adorned in either ordinary or exquisite attire, their expressions twisted in agony.
"Not bad," Albus commented, disdainfully patting a wax statue's face with his right hand.
Elros glanced at him.
"Didn't your mother teach you manners?"
Albus chuckled.
"I don't have a mother."
Elros was momentarily taken aback, not quite sure how to respond to that statement.
In the background, Poet Iraeta spoke with a touch of admiration, "In the past, when rumors circulated about me having an affair

with a widow, I'd quietly spread gossip that I had kidnapped the Member of Parliament's daughter and was suspected of murdering a merchant. I even found myself entangled in rumors involving human meat pies, and my neighbors mysteriously vanished.
"As long as I don't care about my reputation and actively tarnish it, no one can perch on the moral high ground and point fingers at me."
As expected of a poet... Lumian praised inwardly. Holding the carbide lamp, he led the way through the room filled with wax statues, their goal being the exit at the far end.
The wax figures, illuminated by the dim yellowish light of the gas wall lamps, appeared unnervingly lifelike. Their eyes seemed to follow Lumian and his companions, creating an unsettling and bizarre atmosphere.
Lumian couldn't shake the memory of the previous wax statues that had come to life and attacked. He couldn't help but feel that any of these figures could suddenly spring to life and lunge at them.
Breaking the indescribable silence, Albus Medici
spoke in a relaxed tone, addressing Elros, "You're Poufer's cousin. Your last name isn't Sauron, is it?"
Elros candidly admitted, "You're right."
Albus casually inquired, "Which family do you belong to?"
Elros turned her head to look at Albus Medici and then at Lumian. She replied with a smile, "My full name is: Elros Einhorn."

Einhorn? Even though Lumian was a young man deprived of an education, he had received Aurore's rigorous education and knew that this last name represented the royal family of the Feysac Empire in the north.

Previously, when he had observed Elros acting reserved and obedient in front of Poufer Sauron, he had assumed that her father's family wasn't particularly outstanding and had perhaps even declined, forcing her to rely on her cousin. He hadn't expected her to bear such a distinguished last name.

It was worth noting that more than a thousand years had passed since the establishment of the Feysac Empire in the late Fourth Epoch. The Einhorn family had always held the throne, while the Sauron family had lost the Intis throne nearly two centuries ago. It was clear which family held the upper hand.

Albus Medici glanced at Elros in surprise and added a touch of provocation to his words, "You're an Einhorn? I couldn't tell."

Elros gazed straight ahead, returning to her obedient demeanor.

She spoke emotionlessly, "The Sauron family and the Einhorn family often formed marriage alliances. Even though the Sauron family has long left the Intis throne, this tradition endures. My mother just happened to marry a member of the Einhorn royal family."

Poet Iraeta asked with interest, "So your last name is Einhorn. Why did you come to Trier? You were living in Red Swan Castle when I first met Count Poufer."

"Six years ago, my father perished in the war between the Feysac Empire and the Loen Kingdom. My mother brought me back to Trier, where we stayed with my maternal grandfather, who also happened to be Poufer's grandfather," Elros explained with a soft sigh. "Two years ago, my maternal grandfather passed away. Last year, my mother succumbed to illness."

The frequency of death does seem remarkably high? Right, Aurore had mentioned that while the four powerful countries of the Northern Continent sometimes collaborated and at other times clashed, marriages between the royal family and nobles never ceased. Consequently, cousin marriages had become frequent... According to Franca, the Hunter pathway has mainly been in the hands of the Sauron and Einhorn families. Could a Hunter-Hunter marriage guarantee that future generations would be better suited for the Hunter pathway? Lumian held the carbide lamp and proceeded down the corridor toward the exit of the wax statue's room.

The wax statues on either side, bathed in the yellowish glow of the carbide lamp, seemed eerily lifelike.
As they ventured further down the corridor, it grew narrower, and the wax statues almost obstructed their path.
Lumian couldn't help but bump into them. Their bodies were cold, and their limbs felt stiff. They were indeed genuine wax statues.
Finally, the four of them reached the end of the room and opened the iron-black wooden door.
Just as Lumian was about to depart, a subconscious impulse made him glance back.
In the dimly lit room, the pained expressions on the wax statues' faces appeared haunting, as if their eyes were fixed on the exit.
Lumian was reminded of his earlier encounter with the wax statue in the river. He instinctively raised his wrist slightly and discreetly extended the middle finger toward the wax statue in the room.
"I really wish I could set this place on fire," Albus Medici lamented with a touch of regret.
Lumian was momentarily surprised, but he secretly concurred.
Good idea!
He had a suspicion that if he could incinerate these wax statues, the potion would be fully digested.
Elros Einhorn remarked calmly, "Red Swan Castle experiences an average of three fires a month."
Is she suggesting we should go ahead and burn it down without any apprehension? Lumian grumbled in his thoughts and proceeded into the corridor behind the wax statue's room.
The passageway descended diagonally, leading them deeper underground.
Lumian felt an urge to purse his lips and whistle in amazement, but he resisted.
The four of them continued down until the corridor leveled out once more.
The wall lamps were not lit. Whether gas or candles, they slumbered in the darkness.
With the yellowish glow of their four carbide lamps, Lumian discerned a room at a diagonal angle ahead, its wooden door slightly ajar. A faint, lingering odor of blood emanated from within.
He approached and pushed open the wooden door.
Light streamed into the room, and the scene within was cast upon the eyes of Lumian, Albus, and the rest of the group.
It was a small bedroom, but time had not been kind to it. The bed had crumbled, the wood decayed, and the table lay in ruins. A

collection of assorted items lay scattered in the center of the room.
The walls bore vivid, deep gouges, as if they had been violently clawed at by someone until their fingers must have bled and rotted.
The blood, having seeped into the crevices, had oxidized over time, turning black. Its original appearance was lost, but a faint cloyed odor still lingered.
Then, a whistle reached Lumian's ears.
Albus Medici expressed his emotions through this sound.
He moved past Lumian, entering the room, and ran his fingers along the deep scratches on the wall.
"I can only imagine the horrifying sounds that were produced," the chubby-faced Elros commented, her focus on the matter somewhat off.
Lumian surmised that someone from Red Swan Castle had once descended into madness and been confined in this room. The marks on the wall were the haunting legacy of their torment.
After a cursory search that yielded no findings, they pressed on.
They opted for the right path at the three-way intersection, leading them to a room with its wooden door partially open.
Inside, the room was in shambles, marred by the presence of the blackened bloodstains. The walls appeared to be adorned with what could only be described as decaying flesh.
Albus Medici observed it and let out a disapproving click of his tongue.
"A guy exploded here. From the inside out. Blood and flesh splattered everywhere."
Lumian nodded almost imperceptibly. The judgment aligned with his.
Could it have been the result of a Pyromaniac losing control and meeting their end?
Poet Iraeta, holding a carbide lamp in one hand, took a puff from his cherrywood pipe, struggling slightly, and offered his own perspective.
"I can't quite fathom why such a tragedy unfolded, but there's a certain poetic quality to it."
Is an explosion a form of art? Lumian muttered as he entered the room and began his search.
In this environment, his emotions were somewhat more agitated than usual, and his aggressive impulses were undeniably heightened.
The putrid blood and decaying flesh seemed to exude an aura that could influence one's mental state.
After moving forward for over ten meters, the group discovered

another room adjacent to the corridor, its wooden door partially open.
The room didn't reek of blood, but Lumian felt as if sharp blades were pressed against his skin, causing his hair to stand on end.
Sharpness!
That was the word that naturally came to his mind.
As the light from the carbide lamp illuminated the room, Lumian, Elros, and the rest observed that the furniture had been reduced to tiny fragments. Beds and desks lay in finger-sized squares, partially collapsed.
"Remarkable swordsmanship," Albus Medici remarked with a chuckle.
Lumian wasn't too concerned with this matter. What troubled him was that this place was unlike the previous two rooms, which had signs of decaying blood and rotting flesh.
Where had the person who once occupied this room disappeared to? Lumian scrutinized the area intently before deciding to move on.
Shortly, they reached a descending stone staircase. The lower portion of the staircase was enveloped in darkness, seemingly endless.
On either side of the stairs were rooms with slightly open wooden doors. The interior of these rooms was pitch-black, as though it could swallow all light and motion.
Lumian instinctively chose the left side, pushed open the door, and extended the carbide lamp into the room.
Bathed in the direct yellow light, an intact bed, an undamaged table, and a chair all stood in perfect order.
Two gleaming, cold swords adorned the wall before them. On the table, a pile of colorful building blocks of various shapes and a row of iron soldiers, each as tall as a candle, were neatly arranged.
These iron soldiers were clad in blue coats with golden embroidery. They wielded spears that resembled tree branches or black rifles, a popular toy in Intis that had enjoyed popularity for a century or two.
Lumian walked over and placed the carbide lamp down. He picked up one of the iron soldiers and adeptly twisted the torsion spring on its back.
With a series of creaking sounds, the iron soldier sprang to life, swaying forward while raising its spear.
Memories of owning a set of such iron soldiers during his youth, before his mother's illness and his pépé's financial troubles, flooded into Lumian's mind.
"There are no signs of damage here. It's as if it contains items from

childhood to adulthood," Elros observed as she circled the room.
Albus Medici grinned and remarked, "I wonder where the owner of this room is now. Hopefully not mad enough to scratch the walls or self-destruct from the inside out."
As they conversed, Lumian extended his right palm, attempting to open the wooden desk drawer to see what it held.
Suddenly, an ethereal voice echoed around them.
"My grandfather went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace, never to return..."
Lumian tensed, his body swiveling as he scanned the surroundings for the source of the voice.
Albus, Elros, and the others followed suit, clearly hearing the unsettling voice.
"My father went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace, never to return...
"My brother went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace, never to return...
"I... hear the summonings from the depths of the underground palace..."
Lumian, Albus, Elros, and Iraeta simultaneously directed their gazes at the wooden door across the corridor.
The spectral voice emanated from there.
With a snap, Iraeta, positioned in the corridor, pushed open the wooden door behind him. Ignorance often knew no fear.
The yellowish light immediately illuminated two figures and a pile of materials.
One of them was a flesh-toned puppet mounted on a metal frame, hairless with rudimentary facial features.
Surrounding it were molds, hair, clay, and pigments stored in containers.
A man clad in a grayish-black robe, his natural red hair flowing, was diligently painting the puppet with a fine brush.
Sensing the intrusion of light, the man slowly raised his head, revealing a weathered face adorned with thick hair and dark, iron-like eyes.
Upon spotting Lumian, Iraeta, and the rest, he spoke slowly, his voice ethereal as he inquired, "Are you here to make wax statues?"

Chapter 426: "Curse"

Iraeta unconsciously took a step back.

"No, there's no need."

He snapped out of his daze and focused on the man in the gray robe who was diligently painting the puppet in the dimly lit room. He asked with curiosity, "Are you the artisan of wax statues who serves Count Poufer?"

This Count had a peculiar hobby of crafting wax figures for his friends.

The man with the fiery red beard avoided direct eye contact and continued coloring the half-finished puppet in front of him.

Lumian, who had already returned to the corridor, turned his head and glanced at Albus Medici. Instead of speaking, he directed his question at the enigmatic man in the cluttered room, "What should we call you?"

Lumian was certain that something was amiss with the wax statue artisan before him, but he couldn't determine the extent of the problem. They had just noticed that no light escaped from this room, indicating that the man had been working on the puppet in complete darkness!

The man with deep, iron-black eyes and a fiery red beard looked up once more and spoke in a spectral tone, "My grandfather went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace, never to return...

"My father went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace, never to return..."

"So, are you mad as well?" Albus Medici interrupted the man's ramblings.

The man hesitated for a moment before answering, "I... hear the summonings from the depths of the underground palace..."

At this point, his gaze swept across the faces of Lumian, Albus, and Elros. The corners of his mouth, obscured by his beard, curled up slightly, hinting at an elusive smile.

His vacant iron-black eyes grew more intense, and his voice carried a sense of urgency.

"The three of you, hurry to the depths of the underground palace..."

Iraeta muttered under his breath, "Why not me?"

Lumian's mind raced as he sought common ground with Albus and Elros.

As Poet Iraeta had pointed out, the "three of you" in the strange man's statement didn't include him. Given the peculiar atmosphere and circumstances, something was definitely awry.

I'm a Hunter, and Albus is a Hunter. Could Elros also be a Hunter?

While Lumian contemplated this, Albus Medici seemed unfazed by the eerie words of the wax statue artisan. He flashed a cheeky smile and asked, "Do you want us to venture deep into the underground palace to rescue your grandfather, father, and brother, or would you prefer to send your regards?"

Quite aggressive... Logically speaking, he's at least a Pyromaniac, the kind whose potion has mostly been digested. There's no need to provoke everyone with every word... Could it be that he's intentionally misleading others to believe that he's only a Provoker? Lumian looked at Albus's well-defined side profile and muttered inwardly.

The man painting the puppet paid Albus no attention and continued his work.

"Sorry to bother you," Lumian said, not giving Albus a chance to escalate the situation. He reached for the vermilion wooden door's handle, gently closed it, and left the room behind.

Lumian decided not to explore the room with the iron-clad soldier, fearing it might trigger unwanted events.

In the darkness, Lumian descended the worn stone steps, carbide lamp in hand.

Amid the echoing footsteps, Elros Einhorn suddenly commented, "That man looked like a lion..."

Lumian recalled the wax statue artisan's appearance. Indeed, with his long, dense red hair and beard, he did resemble a humanized lion.

Albus Medici gently swayed the carbide lamp in his hand and glanced at Elros.

"This is your maternal grandfather's castle. You've lived here for nearly six years. Don't act like a visitor like us who doesn't know anything."

"I genuinely don't know who that person was," Elros replied, shaking her head. "I rarely enter the underground palace. The farthest I've gone is the room filled with wax statues."

In other words, during your limited explorations, you had chosen the same path as me. You had selected the Door of Madness among the three doors of Hope, Madness, and Death... *Why didn't you continue deeper? What were you worried about?* Lumian deduced some information from Elros Einhorn's succinct answer.

Albus scoffed.

"Have you heard of the legend of Sauron family members going mad and venturing into the depths of the underground palace, never to return?

"For example, my grandfather went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace..."

The member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order mimicked the man's speech with an uncanny accuracy.
Excellent, you've asked the question I wanted to ask... Despite Albus Medici's grating manner, he did serve a purpose.
He had no reservations and, with great acumen, asked questions that he couldn't.
With such a teammate around, Lumian could maintain a semblance of distance and conceal his true thoughts and attitude.
The worn stone steps seemed never-ending. As Elros descended carefully, she sighed and explained,
"I've always known about such legends.
"The master of Red Swan Castle and the Sauron family members who reside here, both men and women, gradually become violent and irritable, eventually going mad. It's possible for them to enter the depths of the underground palace after mutilating themselves and never return. These incidents occur sporadically, sometimes once every few years, or two or three times a year.
"Apart from the family members who yearn to restore their forebears' glory, Sauron has distanced himself from this ancient castle. He doesn't want to go mad.
"This has a certain effect, ensuring the Sauron family's continuation and heritage. However, that madness seems to be a curse, a curse rooted in the bloodline. Sauron, who resides elsewhere, will occasionally have people suddenly return and repeat the experiences of their forebears here."
Is this the surface explanation behind the Sauron family's decline? If the core members of the family go mad one by one and enter the depths of the underground palace without returning, the family will indeed decline bit by bit... Why did Elros tell us in detail about the matters that's privy to the Sauron family... She believes that we won't leave alive, so she's satisfying her desire to share? Lumian couldn't help but recall the nightmares he had experienced due to the King's Pie game.
In the nightmares, Red Swan Castle was overrun by lunatics who mutilated themselves in gruesome ways, gouging out their own eyeballs and more.
It seemed that these lunatics might have included various individuals from the Sauron family who had gone mad over the course of more than two centuries.
But not all of them shared the Sauron bloodline. Lumian remembered how Novelist Anori and other participants in the King's Pie game had also gone insane and committed grotesque acts to themselves and others, despite lacking the Sauron family's lineage.

Albus Medici, in his irritating manner, wore a smirk as he asked Elros, "Did your maternal grandfather also go crazy and venture into the depths of the underground palace?"
Elros remained calm and replied, "No, he passed away due to chronic headaches. Not every owner of Red Swan Castle eventually goes mad."
Albus, undeterred, continued to press, "What are the common factors among those who don't go mad?"
Elros's face was illuminated by the carbide lamp's glow as she responded in her usual tone, "It's a family secret."
In essence, she was saying: "I'm not going to tell you."
This response left Lumian, who was leading the way, feeling a growing sense of frustration.
If Elros had simply cautioned them against prying into the Sauron family's affairs from the start, he wouldn't have reacted emotionally. But her willingness to share intriguing information, only to withhold the crucial details, felt like a deliberate provocation.
After a moment of silence, Albus Medici's smile returned, and he probed further, "What about your mother?"
Elros replied, "She passed away normally due to an illness."
Albus chuckled and continued, "What about you? You also have the Sauron family's bloodline. Will you suddenly go crazy?"
Elros turned her head and glanced at the impolite fellow, revealing an indescribable smile.
"In the long run, we'll all go mad."
Who do you mean by "we"? Lumian's forehead twitched, sensing that Elros wasn't just referring to the Sauron family.
A moment of silence followed, broken by Poet Iraeta's heartfelt sigh.
"The fear of a family, the curse that has lasted for generations, and the forebears who have ventured into the dark underground. What an excellent theme for an essay. It's very inspiring. If Anori were to find out, he would definitely produce a classic novel. Even I would have the urge to write a long poem."
As they conversed, the four of them finally reached the end of the lengthy stone steps.
Before them stretched a vast hall with grayish-white stone pillars supporting the dark ceiling above.
The four carbide lamps illuminated the space, revealing several piles of bones partially exposed behind certain stone pillars.
"Plenty of the dead." Albus Medici, undaunted, sighed with a smile and strolled toward one of the bone piles.
At that moment, Lumian picked up a rustling sound.

He swiftly raised his head and raised the carbide lamp.
In the dim yellow lighting, mottled ceiling, a colossal shadow moved with surprising speed, crawling across the uneven surface before vanishing into the shadows on the other side.
The shadow was a spider-like creature.
In comparison to its kind, it had only one pair of eyes, but each eye contained numerous tiny single eyes moving independently, radiating a cold and eerie light.
Countless long, thick bristles encircled a withered, blackened, fist-sized heart on its back.
Lumian's blood ran cold as a term leaped to the forefront of his mind: Black Hunting Spider!
This was one of the main ingredients of the Conspirer potion.
Over the past month, although Lumian hadn't yet acquired any ingredients related to Black Hunting Spiders and Sphinxes, he had amassed a general understanding of these two Beyonder creatures, including their appearance and abilities. Recently, he had contemplated "teleporting" to another location in his quest to locate these creatures.
However, the Black Hunting Spider he had just witnessed was even more unusual than the information he had gathered. It deviated significantly in several details, particularly the presence of a withered heart that eerily resembled that of a human.

Chapter 427: Hunters´ Cooperation

The suspected Black Hunting Spider flashed and disappeared into the shadows on the other side of the hall.

Lumian only saw it but didn't react in time. Albus Medici and Elros Einhorn were equally caught off guard.

By the time Iraeta sensed the abnormality and looked up at the ceiling, the colossal black spider had vanished.

"What are you looking at?" the poet asked curiously, casually commenting, "There's no mural on the walls of the underground maze. This doesn't match the Sauron family's former glory."

In the Northern Continent, murals were essential when constructing grand buildings. All painters took pride in being invited to create these magnificent works of art, especially when it came to epic paintings on cathedral domes and walls. These paintings were not just a status symbol but also required months or even years to complete.

Lumian withdrew his gaze and smiled.

"I saw a venomous spider. No one has been here for a long time. It seems to have become a haven for dangerous creatures."

Without waiting for Iraeta's response, he suggested, "Albus, Elros, and I have impressive skills and extensive hunting experience. It's clear you lack sufficient training. Why don't you return to the surface ahead of time? Continuing forward could be perilous for you. You don't truly believe you can find the crown and become king, do you?"

Iraeta muttered, "No problem. You're my sponsor, after all.

"If it weren't to accompany you guys and have some fun, I wouldn't venture into this pitch-black underground. I'm past the age of adventuring and performing arts. Alright, I'll head back to the surface now and wait for you in the living room. There's La Fée Verte, black tea, refreshments, and tobacco. It's much more comfortable than here."

As the poet spoke, he turned and walked toward the stone steps at the hall's exit.

Just as he took several steps, a blaze erupted from the shadow on his right, hurtling towards Iraeta like a crimson spear.

Behind Lumian, flames surged around Albus Medici, transforming him into a crimson spear that collided with the flaming spear attacking the poet.

The member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order transformed into a crimson spear and flew out with a whoosh, colliding with the flaming spear that had attacked the poet.

With a resounding crash, the two flaming spears disintegrated,

revealing Albus Medici and the colossal black spider with a withered heart.
The spider emitted a high-frequency squeak, raising its body and swinging its four thick-furred limbs, resembling scythes that flickered with a cold light, at Albus Medici.
At the same time, a nearly white-hot spear flew and struck the side of the black spider, incinerating its hard shell and piercing through it.
It was Elros Einhorn. She seemed prepared and quietly shifted her position, waiting for the colossal black spider to appear.
In the next moment, agile crimson Fire Ravens followed different trajectories, rushing into the wound created by the burning-white spear.
Rumble!
The fiery explosion within the colossal black spider's body created a chaotic storm of flames, tearing at its outer carapace and flesh.
Lumian didn't hold back his impressive abilities.
He had started condensing the Fire Raven the moment Albus Medici confronted the assailant.
The colossal black spider's scythe appendages missed Albus, who had seized the opportunity to retreat.
Under the relentless assault, the spider emitted a piercing screech that reverberated within its chitinous shell.
The shriveled, blackened heart behind it suddenly glowed dark red, creating blazing fireballs.
These fireballs formed a net, enveloping the colossal black spider, and shot toward Lumian, Albus, and Elros, leaving crimson trails in their wake.
In contrast, Iraeta, who had been stunned by the superhuman battle, was ignored and unharmed.
Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!
As Lumian and the others dodged the incoming fireballs, one of them shot deep into the hall, dissipating quickly.
Hidden within the fireball, the colossal black spider seized the opportunity to break through Lumian and the others' encirclement and disappear once more.
The crimson flames around them continued to burn. Albus Medici glanced at the dark-red liquid dripping from the heavily injured black spider but didn't immediately pursue it. Instead, he smiled at Lumian and said,
"Nice baiting."
Lumian didn't deny it.
He had asked Poet Iraeta to return to the surface alone to lure out the colossal black spider as bait.

If the spider didn't take the bait, Iraeta would have left the underground palace without any danger. But if the spider planned to hunt an ordinary person alone, Lumian was ready to use Spirit World Traversal and the Spell of Harrumph to protect the target. He aimed to eliminate the creature, suspected to be a potion ingredient, as quickly as possible.

With such an opportunity, he wasn't willing to hold back and hide his trump cards. He wanted to end the battle swiftly to prevent any mishaps.

Unexpectedly, Albus Medici's reaction was quicker than his. Therefore, Lumian stopped in time and switched to Fire Ravens. He intended to observe the black spider's combat style and uncover any secrets it might hold.

Now, Lumian was certain that the colossal black spider was more formidable than a Black Hunting Spider. If it were the latter, it would never have escaped the encirclement of three Hunters; it would have perished from the repeated explosions.

Although it was confirmed that the black spider wasn't equivalent to a Black Hunting Spider, it was undoubtedly from the Hunter pathway. With the corresponding Beyonder powers, the special parts on its body could certainly be used to brew potions.

Lumian turned to Elros and said straightforwardly, "That monster is different from a Black Hunting Spider. There's a human-like heart on its back. What's going on?"

Elros gazed at the dark-red blood dripping into the hall's shadows, pondering for a moment.

"I've never seen such a Beyonder creature before."

She paused for a moment before continuing, "All I know is that if the owner of Red Swan Castle and many core members of the Sauron family don't go mad and venture into the depths of the underground palace without returning, someone will extract their heart and send it somewhere in the underground palace."

Upon hearing this, Lumian suddenly recalled a scene he had dreamt of due to the lingering effects of the King's Pie game.

In a bronze coffin surrounded by countless white candles, a hand with dark-red, almost black blood vessels extended, holding a shriveled, withered, black heart with some blood seeping out.

*What the f*ck is the Sauron family up to?* Lumian couldn't help but curse inwardly.

What lay in the depths of this underground palace, and how many mutated monsters lurked within?

At that moment, Poet Iraeta finally snapped out of his daze. He looked at Lumian and the others in shock, fear, and excitement.

"Are all of you Beyonders capable of using Beyonder powers?"

"You know about Beyonders too?" Albus Medici wore an expression that suggested he wasn't worthy of knowing.
As Iraeta approached Lumian, he quickly explained, "Seven or eight years ago, I went to a battlefield to gather material and saw something. I knew that there were many people in our army who could use superpowers. They were called Beyonders."
"We do have superpowers, and they look quite similar," Lumian said with a smile, glancing around. "Do you want to follow us deeper or return to the surface yourself?"
Iraeta didn't hide his fear and muttered, "Of course, I'll follow you. Although it's very likely that I'll encounter the large spider again, it's better than walking alone in the darkness with unknown monsters lurking around.
"I don't want the last poem of my life to be 'Oh, foolish Iraeta.'"
Lumian pondered for a few seconds and calmly said, "If you wish to return to the surface, I can escort you to the entrance of the underground palace."
"Then I'll definitely choose to return!" Iraeta changed his mind without hesitation.
Lumian then turned to Albus and Elros and asked, "Do you want to join me, wait here, or venture deeper by yourselves?"
Albus Medici gave Lumian a deep look and sneered.
"I didn't expect you to be such a moral person. You can escort this poet with a dubious reputation yourself."
His implication was clear: "You must have ulterior motives for escorting someone out, considering your lack of morals."
He didn't specify if he intended to stay or venture in alone.
"I'm with Albus," Elros, who stood by Albus, replied with a smile, holding the carbide lamp.
Lumian observed the dark-red blood droplets left by the black spider and proceeded to ascend the stone steps with Iraeta, using the carbide lamp for illumination.
In the pitch-black and silent underground, they returned to the corridor where the wax statue artisan and the iron soldiers were.
Poet Iraeta glanced back at the deep darkness below and said to his sponsor, "Those two shouldn't be simple."
"I know," Lumian replied nonchalantly.
Holding the carbide lamp that emitted a yellowish glow, he advanced at a moderate pace.
Iraeta walked closely beside him and continued in his usual tone, "The war between the Loen Kingdom and the Feysac Empire ended over seven years ago. But Miss Elros mentioned that her father died in the war six years ago. If I recall correctly, it was likely due to dissatisfaction with the Feysac Empire's losing treaty, leading to

a rebellion. This was a civil war in the Feysac Empire. Why did Miss Elros mention the Loen Kingdom?
"Is her father a representative of the extreme faction or a member of the royal family who perished in the rebellion?"
A member of the royal family who rebelled? *Is that why they fled to Trier?* Lumian considered the information provided by the political enthusiast, Iraeta.
Iraeta glanced at his sponsor and continued, "Actually, before today, I saw Albus Medici elsewhere."
Lumian's curiosity was piqued as he asked, "Where?"
Iraeta glanced around and lowered his voice.
"Sacred Heart Cloister."

Sacred Heart Cloister? The largest cloister in Trier's Eternal Blazing Sun Church? *Why did Albus Medici go there?* Could he be an undercover agent sent by the Purifier into the Iron and Blood Cross Order? Or did Gardner Martin instruct him to keep an eye on the Sacred Heart Cloister? Lumian's mind raced with questions and guesses.

As he advanced, clutching a carbide lamp, Iraeta hastily interjected with more information.

"I have a friend at the Sacred Heart Cloister. I often go there to drink with him."

Lumian, momentarily diverting his focus from Albus Medici, jested, "Can the cloister monks drink?"

The two moved through the shadowy passageway, guided solely by the yellowish glow of the carbide lamp.

Iraeta rambled, "Of course they can, but they can't partake in liquor or get inebriated. The wine brewed by the Sacred Heart Cloister is the finest I've ever tasted."

"Is your friend a monk?" Lumian walked at a moderate pace, his footsteps echoing through the seemingly endless passageway.

Iraeta appeared content conversing with Ciel and didn't hide anything.

"Yes, he's a member of the Brotherhood Minor and served as my nephew's baptism priest. Later, he could no longer tolerate the cathedral's clergy indulging in pleasures and chose to become a monk. He joined the Sacred Heart Cloister and is currently overseeing the brewery."

A member of the Brotherhood Minor, champions of temperance and asceticism... Lumian deduced this and redirected their conversation.

"How often have you and your friend seen Albus Medici? What was the reason for his visit to the Sacred Heart Cloister?"

"Just once," Iraeta muttered. "I don't concern myself with such matters. There are no nuns there. When I saw him, he was walking through the corridor with a monk and entered the rear of the cloister."

It appears that Albus Medici had not entered covertly or with fear of discovery... Lumian deduced this from Iraeta's account.

Amidst Poet Iraeta's relentless search for topics, the two of them finally passed through the eerie wax statue room, leaving behind the hall with the enigmatic doors of Hope, Madness, and Death. They retraced their steps to the underground palace.

Iraeta let out a long sigh of relief and relaxed. He grumbled, "The

underground palace is so dangerous, and there are creatures with supernatural abilities. Poufer truly led us into an adventure down here!
"Is he attempting to get us killed?"
You've all been corrupted by the King's Pie game many times. I wonder if you're truly alive... Lumian refrained from a direct response to Iraeta's grievances, opting for a playful smile as he remarked,
"It seems that the more frightened and tense you are, the more you like to talk."
"That's what makes me feel alive," Iraeta confessed. He extinguished the carbide lamp as they exited the underground palace via the spiral staircase.
Lumian turned back, retracing his steps to the Door of Madness.
He hadn't closed the door when he left. Even though he hadn't approached yet, the yellowish light from the carbide lamp made the wax statues appear faintly, as if they were waiting in the darkness.
Lumian stopped at the door, slowly bent down, and placed the carbide lamp on the ground in front of him.
Then, he straightened up and swept his gaze across the wax statues' faces, their expressions frozen in agony and shrouded in shadows.
Crimson Fire Ravens began to materialize around him, one after another.
Since Count Poufer had shown ill intent by leading them into the perilous depths of the underground palace—any ordinary person would already have died—there was no reason to show any courtesy to a member of the Sauron family, the owner of Red Swan Castle!
Lumian's plan was straightforward: to set the wax statues ablaze. This had several purposes. First, it might assist in digesting his potion. Second, it could preemptively eliminate potential threats, preventing the wax statues from coming to life and attacking at a critical moment. Lastly, it could create a chaotic situation that would disrupt Count Poufer's secret plan, sowing doubt and confusion for their further exploration.
Chaos often created opportunities.
Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! With a swift motion, he released a flurry of Crimson Fire Ravens that darted towards the wax statues.
After dispatching two batches of Fire Ravens, Lumian dropped to one knee, pressing his hands to the ground.
From his palms, fiery serpents slithered out, winding their way through the pile of wax statues and swiftly igniting them.

A cacophony of explosions followed as the wax statues' heads burst, and their lower extremities were engulfed in flames, creating a cage of crimson fire.
The flesh-white wax that composed their bodies melted rapidly, turning into liquid droplets or softening and crumbling away, rendering them fragile under the dual onslaught of explosion and combustion.
Smack!
The "muscles" on one of the wax statues completely disintegrated, revealing a new face.
It was a human face!
It was a male human who had lost his eyes and died long ago, his face filled with pain!
Silently, more wax statues softened and crumbled.
Without exception, there was a human corpse inside every one of them.
Among the corpses encased in the wax statues were men and women, some with exposed flesh and skin, others with heads and bodies that appeared to have been crudely stitched together after death. Some had open stomachs, their intestines tangled and filled with white wax, creating a grotesque sight...
What all of them had in common was the haunting expression of pain etched across their faces, as if they had lived through unspeakable horrors or had been trapped in the darkest of nightmares.
As Lumian observed, the melted wax transformed into a viscous liquid that oozed from the faces of the deceased humans. It was as if these tortured souls were weeping tears of relief as they faced the purifying embrace of the flames.
Inside the statues are actually real people... Lumian, who had his fair share of horrifying scenes, couldn't help but tense up, instinctively feeling repulsed and afraid.
He finally knew where the ordinary people from Red Swan Castle who had gone mad and mutilated themselves in his nightmares had gone.
Lumian rose to his feet, clutching the carbide lamp. Crimson flames erupted from his body, transforming into blazing meteors that streaked to every corner of the wax statue-filled chamber, turning it into an inferno.
The flesh-white wax began to burn fervently, feeding upon itself until there was no space left for the fire to consume.
Lumian's eyes reflected the crimson conflagration and the viscous wax tears on his pale face.
He didn't avert his gaze but watched intently.

At that moment, he gained a newfound understanding of his pyromaniac abilities. The once-vague third acting principle became clear.
The Pyromaniac wreaked havoc and caused utter catastrophe!
As for Pyromaniacs, they could willingly unleash disaster and destruction upon anyone.
Lumian fervently wished that the heretics and those who had gone "mad" and could only harm others would be engulfed by the flames!
Having amalgamated his various acts into this principle, Lumian had an uncommonly clear sense that his Pyromaniac potion had been entirely digested. He could even hear an imaginary shattering sound.
With a series of thuds, the lifeless bodies, stripped of their wax support, fell one by one to the ground. They piled up and burned even more fiercely.
All of a sudden, the wooden door creaked open from the exit opposite the wax statue's chamber.
The wax statue artisan, his thick beard and hair resembling a humanoid lion, stood before Lumian.
His iron-black eyes were tinged crimson by the flames that surged toward the ceiling. His voice sounded ethereal as he inquired, "Why... did you... set my wax statues ablaze?"
Lumian didn't answer; instead, he activated the black mark on his right shoulder.
Spirit World Traversal!
A spectral light flickered within his clothing, and his form swiftly materialized next to the wax statue artisan.
Almost simultaneously, Lumian parted his lips.
"Ha!"
A pale-yellow, gaseous light shot out of his mouth and struck the wax statue artisan's head.
The wax statue artisan, clad in a grayish-black robe, swayed visibly, as if momentarily losing his balance. He didn't lose consciousness completely; it was more like he had undergone a Psychic Piercing and was in a state of shock induced by the pain.
Lumian didn't rely solely on the Spell of Harrumph. He raised his prepared left palm and hurled a crimson fireball, tightly compressed in layers, into the wax statue artisan's mouth and nose with Fire Infusion.
The fireball, gradually turning white in color, whooshed into the target's mouth and nostrils, invading his brain.
Boom!
The blazing white fireball exploded from the inside out while

Lumian watched as the wax statue artisan's head expanded rapidly before exploding.
Flaming flesh and blood spurted out. Lumian, already prepared, shielded his face with the carbide lamp in his right hand, leaving the back of his hand stained with blood.
With a thud, the wax statue artisan, with only a small half of his head remaining, swayed and collapsed to the ground.
Lumian, who had meticulously prepared a sequence of attacks, found himself momentarily taken aback. He hadn't expected the situation to resolve so effortlessly.
He had foreseen that the enigmatic wax statue artisan might pose a formidable challenge, and he had readied himself to "teleport" instantly if things took a turn for the worse.
It was worth noting that the wax statue that had reanimated previously had been more formidable than the wax statue artisan himself. Merely being in its presence had weighed heavily on Lumian's body and mind, almost rendering him incapable of resistance.
Did he possess the unique ability to create these wax statues, but lacked inherent power? Or did he need to draw strength from the Sauron family's underground palace to bring these menacing wax figures to life? Perhaps my attack was too swift, leaving him no time to react. He perished on the spot before he could tap into any external strength? Lumian gazed down at the wax statue artisan and assessed the situation.
...
In the depths of the underground palace, within a hall adorned with white candles,
Poufer Sauron, seated in a corner, abruptly opened his eyes and fixed his gaze upon the bronze coffin situated in the center of the chamber.
Around the coffin, numerous candles strangely extinguished without warning.
Wh— Poufer rose to his feet, his expression slightly twisted in consternation.
...
At the exit of the wax statue chamber, Lumian witnessed a crimson radiance emanating from the wax statue artisan's body.
Initially, the luminescence surged towards the head, but only a small fragment of the wax statue artisan's head remained. Consequently, it shifted to his chest, yet it couldn't dissipate.
Lumian felt a tinge of surprise. He tore open the grayish-black robe of the wax statue master, unveiling his chest.
There lay a sinister, pitch-black wound, and the space where his

heart should have resided was hollow!
The heart is missing... Elros had mentioned that the Sauron family members' hearts had to be sent deep into the underground palace... Lumian vaguely grasped the reason behind the wax statue artisan's formidable yet fragile nature.
Ultimately, the crimson light coalesced into an ethereal entity with myriad gullies, resembling a shrunken blood-colored brain.
Unsure of its significance, Lumian stashed it away and made his exit.
The flames in the room continued to burn, but for some unknown reason, they failed to spread.
...
In the stone pillar hall where the confrontation with the black spider had transpired.
Albus and Elros observed as Lumian returned, carrying a carbide lamp that emitted a faint yellowish glow.
Almost simultaneously, they noticed the specks of blood on Lumian's body.
"Did you kill the poet?" Albus asked, amused.
Lumian shook his head and replied calmly, "I killed the one making the wax statues."

Chapter 429: Orders

Upon hearing Lumian's response, Albus's eyes widened slightly, and his eyebrows twitched.

Elros's mouth hung open as if something was stuck in her throat.

She quickly smiled and scrutinized Lumian's face with a meaningful gaze.

At that moment, Albus returned to normal and gazed at Lumian. He clicked his tongue and said, "You're really ruthless. You even went back and killed the wax statue guy."

"I had no choice. He stopped me from burning the wax statues," Lumian said with a gentle smile.

Albus's eyebrows twitched again.

"Did you really burn them?"

"Of course," Lumian shared his findings sincerely. "The wax statues' surfaces melted and peeled away to reveal human corpses."

Albus wasn't surprised at all. He applauded and smiled mockingly.

"Well done! I must praise your courage."

It's as if he's saying that I'm ignorant and fearless... Lumian didn't believe that Albus was really praising him.

Elros maintained her smile and spoke as though a bystander, "The Sauron family isn't the only one in Red Swan Castle who's gone mad. The butler, guards, valets, and maids have also gone mad. Their deaths after mutilation are terrifying. It's not suitable for their families and the public to know. They can only report their disappearance and compensate them a large sum of money."

Even so, they can still recruit new servants... Is it because the salary is high, or is the matter kept under wraps? Will they only choose foreigners who have just arrived in Trier and don't know anything? Lumian knew that ancient families like Sauron had servants who served them for generations, but their numbers were already limited.

"Shall we continue forward?" Elros inquired.

"Of course." Lumian still wanted to track down the severely injured black spider and extract the Beyonder characteristic it would produce to study the withered, black heart.

Albus Medici answered with his actions and walked deeper into the hall.

Under the yellowish glow of the carbide lamp, the darkness gradually receded, revealing the drops of dark-red blood flowing from the mutated giant spider.

As he advanced, he casually asked Elros, "Who's responsible for sending the extracted hearts into the depths of the underground

palace?"
"Just because members of the Sauron family go mad and disappear into the depths of the underground palace doesn't mean that ordinary members of the Sauron family can't enter. In particular, the successor of Red Swan Castle often goes to certain rooms and halls in the underground maze. It begins the first time Poufer becomes king while playing King's Pie."
Influenced by the frenzied and violent spirit? Lumian recalled the invisible entity that had circled above his head after winning the King's Pie game while not daring to descend due to the Blood Emperor's aura.
Soon, the trio reached the end of the hall. Through an open wooden door, they followed a corridor with numerous reliefs of soldiers engraved on both sides and a few storage rooms.
The yellowish light shone further, first outlining the outline of a wooden door, then a figure.
The figure wore a light-colored formal suit and had curly black hair. He had a slightly mean appearance and was clearly a participant in this gathering. He was Ernst Young, the critic assigned to Count Poufer's team.
"Are you lost?" Albus Medici greeted him "enthusiastically."
Ernst Young held a carbide lamp that no longer emitted any light and smiled bitterly.
"We had already split up, and each believed we could find the Count's crown. But before I could search carefully, the carbide lamp suddenly went off. I had no choice but to return in the dark and search for a room with a bell rope."
"How unlucky." Albus sighed exaggeratedly for Ernst Young.
He had already reached the open door and stood beside Ernst Young.
Suddenly, crimson fireballs shot out from his free left hand, landing beside the critic and creating a blazing circle of flames.
"W-what are you doing?" Ernst Young asked in surprise.
Albus replied with a smile, "I'm here to help you illuminate the area. Isn't it very bright now?"
Ernst Young fell silent, crimson flames dancing on his face.
He's not surprised that Albus can create flames and possesses superpowers... Lumian had sensed that there was something amiss with Ernst Young when he saw him, like a troublemaker sent by Poufer Sauron. However, saying that something was amiss was an understatement; he was entirely abnormal.
Flames raged, and the temperature around Ernst Young soared.
Lumian glanced over and noticed a strange softening on the critic's face.

A viscous, wax-like liquid seeped out of Ernst Young's skin.
As Lumian's forehead throbbed, Albus extended his hands, leaned forward, and pushed open the wooden door.
Amidst the creaking sounds, the scene behind the door was tainted with a yellowish glow.
Coffins of varying sizes had been chiseled into the walls. Chains hung from the ceiling, and coffins of various colors dangled from them. The ground was filled with countless coffins, with only narrow gaps for people to pass through.
At that moment, Ernst Young raised his hands, his eyes empty, and tore at his face.
The half-waxed, half-real skin was torn off, revealing bloody flesh and dark-blue—nearly black—blood vessels.
A potent scent of blood and burning wax permeated the air, causing all the coffins in the hall to tremble simultaneously.
Bang! Bang! Bang! The coffin lids of various colors opened one after another, and black giant spiders with compound eyes, lush bristles, and withered hearts inlaid crawled out.
Rustling sounds filled the air as the giant black spiders covered almost every corner of the hall.
Aiming at Lumian and the others, they extended their mouths and quickly condensed a crimson fireball that was nearly white.
Numerous fireballs flew out, as if a volley had been fired from an artillery battery.
Whether it was Lumian, Albus, or Elros, they all lunged to the side of the corridor, avoiding the location facing the hall.
Rumble! Rumble!
The entire corridor was engulfed in flames, ravaged by the shockwaves. The walls on both sides showed signs of collapse.
Lumian's target was an empty storage room to the side, successfully evading the violent bombardment.
Elros was the same. Only Albus used Ernst Young as a cover.
Amidst the incessant explosions, the critic, who had lost most of his face, shattered into pieces. Flesh and blood splattered, and some parts of his body melted like candles.
The rustling sound resounded once more, and the innumerable black spiders seemed to surge out of the hall.
Lumian's scalp tingled as he listened. His first instinct was to quickly "teleport" away.
In the face of such mutated black spiders, he had no problem dealing with one or two. Two was a bit of a stretch, but three meant he had to consider retreating. And now, there were dozens of them!
Son of a sow! There are so many of you. *What do you usually eat to*

survive? Just air? Lumian cursed inwardly as he activated the black mark on his right shoulder to use Spirit World Traversal.
Suddenly, he heard a nearly ethereal female voice.
The voice quickly became clearer. It belonged to Elros Einhorn.
Then, the girl's voice in Hermes reverberated.
"I command you, in the name of the Sauron family bloodline.
"Leave this area!"
The rustling stopped abruptly, and the entire area fell into an indescribable silence.
After a few seconds, the rapid crawling sounds of arthropods echoed again, but they spread in all directions.
Lumian ceased his attempts to use Spirit World Traversal and cast his gaze towards the corridor beyond.
The flames gradually extinguished, and no black spiders appeared.
Lumian left the side storage room in thought and saw that all the coffins in the hall ahead were open, but there was no sign of the giant black spiders.
Elros, dressed in a light-colored dress, stood in the corridor, her right hand clenched tightly, her left palm hanging low. Her aura seemed slightly different from before, as if the commander-in-chief of an army had arrived before her loyal soldiers, naturally displaying an alluring charm that made people submit to her.
Clap! Clap! Clap! Albus Medici stood up from behind the crumbled Ernst Young, clutching a lamp.
He smiled mockingly and said, "Aren't you an Einhorn? Why are you using the Sauron family's name?"
Elros cast a cold glance at the Iron and Blood Cross Order member, causing him to subconsciously shut his mouth.
"I have half of the Sauron bloodline." Elros turned to Lumian and smiled again. "Do you want to continue?"
"Of course!" Albus Medici was the first to respond.
Lumian cracked his neck and smiled. "The game isn't over yet."
Although he had the urge to escape the underground maze, the more he wanted to succumb to his urges, the more he couldn't show it.
His experience and Aurore's teachings had taught him not to let others guess his true thoughts under such circumstances.
The aura around Elros that made people involuntary submissive gradually dissipated, and she returned to her obedient state.
Lumian and Albus entered the hall ahead side by side and saw that the wooden coffins of various colors were empty. The corpses that should have existed looked like they had been eaten by the giant black spiders.
Just as he was about to pass through the mass tomb, Lumian

spotted a massive black spider sprawled in a corner. Its side was hideously torn, and dark-red blood continued to flow.
This was the Beyonder creature that had previously fought the three Hunters. Due to its severe injuries, it couldn't leave the tomb according to Elros's "orders." It could only stay where it was and "lick" its wounds.
Upon seeing Lumian and the others, the giant black spider half-raised its body and let out a threatening squeak.
Glancing at the shriveled heart on the black spider's back, Lumian casually smiled and said, "It's mine, and the rest of the spoils of war are yours. How does that sound?"
Albus Medici chuckled. "Is that all you eye? Only you care about such things."
Elros's lips curled into a faint smile. "I have no problem with that, but since it's your spoils of war, you can retrieve it yourself. I won't provide any assistance."
"I like that. You can occasionally say something nice," Albus praised Elros before casting his gaze at Lumian.
The two Hunters, a man and a woman, appeared to be waiting to "appreciate" Lumian's performance.
The colossal black spider had suffered severe injuries but had clearly not lost its ability to fight!

Chapter 430: "Reckless"

Sensing Albus and Elros's gazes, Lumian cautiously approached the injured black spider with the carbide lamp in hand.

As a Hunter, he had a clear grasp of his two teammates' current mindsets.

It was akin to navigating a dark forest. Everyone assumed the role of the hunter, but the moment one revealed their vulnerability, they became the hunted, vulnerable to collective assault.

Albus and Elros desired insights into Lumian's condition and capabilities.

They harbored doubts that Lumian could easily dispatch the wax statue artisan, believing he must have paid a significant price. Moreover, they aimed to decipher the precise Sequence of the previous winner of the King's Pie game and the mystical items he carried.

Lumian had no qualms about eliminating the severely injured black spider, but he was reluctant to unveil his trump cards—Spirit World Traversal and the Spell of Harrumph—to Albus and Elros.

As he closed in on the black spider, his thoughts raced, pondering the most efficient strategy that would incur minimal cost and time, making the task as straightforward as possible.

Lumian's gaze swept from the torn-open side of the black spider, which remained trapped in the hall like its kin, dark-red blood oozing out. With his left hand, he casually retrieved a silver earring from his pocket and fastened it to his left earlobe.

Lie!

Having fully digested the Pyromaniac potion, Lumian's emotions steadied. He could now covertly wield the Flog boxing gloves and employ Lie.

Crimson flaming ravens materialized around him.

Almost simultaneously, the colossal black spider reacted. The shriveled heart within it emitted a dark-red glow, conjuring a plethora of menacing fireballs, as if weaving a protective crimson net.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! The Fire Ravens encircling Lumian shot out, each following a distinct trajectory towards their respective targets.

Over a hundred crimson fireballs erupted from the black spider's form, hurtling forward with menacing howls.

Rumble!

In an instant, some Fire Ravens were intercepted by the fireballs, while others detonated them, setting off a series of explosions around the black spider, causing flames to erupt one after another.

At that precise moment, a brilliant fireball streaked towards the hall's exit.
Lumian had been awaiting this opening. He raised his left hand and snapped his fingers.
With a resounding crash, the bright fireball lost its trajectory and plummeted to the ground.
Instead of detonating, flames billowed upward, revealing the black spider's figure.
Lumian charged forward, his left hand ablaze with crimson flames.
They coiled, layer upon layer, compressing until they almost turned white.
Upon reaching the black spider's side, which lay stunned from the impact, Lumian leaned in and swung his left arm, pressing the blazing white fireball against the grotesque laceration, allowing it to penetrate the creature's body.
Amid the frantic thrashing of its limbs, the black spider barely managed to turn around. Lumian had already capitalized on the moment to lean back and roll, increasing the distance between them.
His form materialized beside the crimson sea created by the Fire Ravens and the fireball, distancing himself from the creature's violent aura.
Boom!
The white-hot fireball detonated within the black spider's body. The incineration might not have been visually apparent, but the swift expansion of gas tore through the Beyonder creature entirely, ejecting its chitinous shell along with its flesh.
The colossal black spider emitted a spine-chilling screech as its eight hairy legs frantically recoiled.
Lumian wasted no time, preventing it from regaining its composure. He condensed a crimson spear that gleamed nearly white and hurled it toward the creature.
The flaming spear soared through the air, piercing the gaping wound and pinning the giant black spider to the ground.
The spear disintegrated, setting its insides ablaze. The black spider writhed a few times before falling silent.
Lumian didn't rush to approach his fallen foe. He turned to Albus and Elros. With a smile, he removed Lie and said, "It's settled."
As he spoke, he summoned dozens of crimson Fire Ravens and sent them swooping toward the seemingly lifeless black spider.
Boom!
The black spider leaped once more, self-destructing.
It had been pretending to be dead!

Unfortunately for it, Lumian had maintained his distance and didn't fall into the trap. He only sacrificed a dozen Fire Ravens.
The remaining crimson Fire Ravens swarmed the battered body of the black spider, restoring "peace" to it.
Upon witnessing this, Albus nodded slowly and grudgingly admitted, "Not bad."
Elros observed thoughtfully, offering no immediate response to Lumian's proclamation.
Lumian turned to the motionless black spider, waiting for an iron-black light to emerge from its body before he approached.
After assessing the black spider's condition, he decided to exploit its severely injured state. Potential weaknesses included a probable decrease in Flame Controlling ability and agility. Therefore, he activated Lie and harnessed its Flame Controlling attributes to match his own speed and agility.
The iron-black light didn't converge on the black spider's compound eye as Lumian had anticipated. Instead, it flowed into the shriveled, blackened heart embedded in its back like a stream.
Lumian halted beside his prey, puzzled by the unfolding scene. After the Beyonder characteristic seeped out, he decided to collect it before drawing any conclusions. He carefully removed the shriveled heart, black compound eyes, and poison glands from the mouth, stashing them in separate concealed bags and metal canisters.
"Don't tell me you're merely a Pyromaniac and haven't advanced to become a Conspirer?" Albus taunted.
You know perfectly well that I only recently became a Pyromaniac when I joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order... Lumian grumbled inwardly. He straightened up and offered a smile.
"That's correct. I'm still just a Pyromaniac."
"Pyromaniacs aren't capable of taking down the wax statue artisan..." Elros mumbled softly.
Albus's gaze briefly flickered towards Lumian's pocket where Lie was concealed, but he said nothing more.
See, I'm speaking the truth. If you doubt me and suspect otherwise, there's little I can do... Lumian chuckled, picked up the carbide lamp, and led the way to the exit of the hall.
After traversing another dark corridor, they arrived in a dimly lit room.
Within the yellowish light, iron-clad soldiers donned in blue coats adorned with golden threads came into view.
Unlike children's toys, each one stood nearly two meters tall. The spears they held glinted with a frigid gleam and appeared exceptionally sharp.

"If they were to come to life, it'd be an entire army," Albus remarked with a hint of significance.
Army, soldiers... Lumian suddenly recollected the desire for submission in the King's Pie game. He remembered the wax statue's actions when it attacked him and the evident hierarchy within the Iron and Blood Cross Order—Brigade Commander, Deputy Brigade Commander, Commanding Officer, NCO, and Soldier.
In the midst of his musings, Lumian made an educated guess.
Could the higher ranks of the Hunter pathway involve the military, obedience, and regimentation?
The wax statues resemble soldiers awaiting commands, as do these iron automata. Could a high-Sequence Beyonder of the Hunter pathway possess the ability to create specialized soldiers?
The underground palace of Red Swan Castle is indeed teeming with the essence of the Hunter pathway. It's no wonder I encounter creatures from this pathway so frequently...
This meant that Lumian didn't have to search. He merely needed to engage in combat to secure the corresponding rewards.
What a perilous hunting ground, one that could potentially make me the prey, yet offers substantial gains! He sighed deeply.
Lumian observed as Albus Medici summoned layers of compressed white fireballs and casually sent them gliding across the room.
The fireballs didn't detonate; they hovered silently over the ground, resting on the shoulders and hats of the iron soldiers.
After the trio departed the room, Albus transferred the carbide lamp to his left hand, raised his right palm, and snapped his fingers, emulating Lumian.
Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!
In the room behind them, the white-hot fireballs ignited one after another, setting each other ablaze and causing the ground to quiver slightly.
Delayed Explosion!
One of Pyromaniac's abilities, Delayed Explosion!
Despite the fact that the iron soldiers in the room were constructed of metal, they either lost their limbs or internal components under the formidable shockwave. Some were even buried beneath stone bricks as a result of the collapsed wall.
Noticing Lumian's gaze, Albus wore a satisfied smile.
"To eliminate concealed threats, just like how you handled those wax statues."
"I thought you wouldn't dare," Lumian replied with a grin.
Upon witnessing Albus's actions, Lumian discerned his intentions. He was taken aback that Red Swan Castle's underground palace

appeared to possess a form of self-defense mechanism. No matter how potent the explosions or flames, their effects were confined to a single room, preventing spillover.
Indeed, without such protective measures, Red Swan Castle would have likely crumbled long ago, given the rampant monsters dwelling within... Lumian observed another descending corridor ahead.
At the corridor's terminus stood a pair of hefty iron doors, the dark surface marred by large splotches of red, as if someone had splattered blood on them.
Elros took a deep breath and moved ahead of Lumian and Albus.
She reached the door, carefully set down the carbide lamp, extended her hands, leaned forward, and exerted force.
Amidst a grating sound, the iron-black door slowly swung open.
Lumian's eyelids twitched when he beheld a vast expanse of candlelight.
The bronze coffin from his nightmare was starkly reflected in his vision.
At that moment, nearly a third of the white candles surrounding the coffin had been snuffed out, while a substantial portion still burned brightly.
In the flickering candlelight, the door creaked open. Lumian rapidly surveyed the area but found no other individuals present.
The three Hunters remained rooted by the door for over ten seconds.
Finally, Albus Medici turned his head and tauntingly asked, "Why aren't you guys going in?"
"Why did you stop too?" Elros Einhorn inquired instead of responding.
"We're waiting for you to take the lead," Lumian replied with a casual grin.
This hall was rife with danger and concealed profound secrets. Naturally, he wanted others to scout the path first!
Lumian realized he wasn't alone in thinking this. Albus and Elros shared similar sentiments.
Albus withdrew his gaze and let out a soft chuckle.
"Since you're all cowards, I'll have to do it myself."
With that, he abruptly dropped to one knee and placed his hands on the ground.
Silently, two crimson fire serpents darted toward the bronze coffin.
Hey! Lumian's eyes narrowed. He hadn't anticipated Albus would act so recklessly.
Assaulting the most problematic element without conducting any

investigation?
Elros's expression froze as she instinctively extended her right hand, as if attempting to halt Albus.

Chapter 431: Three Hunters, One Stage

Elros extended her right palm and unleashed a crimson fireball.
The fireball streaked in front of the two fiery serpents and collided with the ground.
Amidst the rumbling, it engulfed the flaming serpents in its own explosion, halting their advance toward the bronze coffin.
Without further ado, Albus picked up the carbide lamp and rose to his feet.
He glanced at Elros and grinned.
"So you do know something?"
Albus then taunted Lumian,"You're in the dark here."
Dammit! If it weren't for this inappropriate setting, I'd go head to head with you... Only now did Lumian realize that Albus's recklessness had been a test and a trap.
"This is the Red Swan Castle of the Sauron family," Elros replied, not directly addressing Albus but stating a simple fact.
She was implying that she had the Sauron family's bloodline and had resided in Red Swan Castle for nearly six years. It was only natural for her to possess knowledge.
Albus shifted his gaze to the white candles, their flames nearly one-third extinguished, as if he hadn't heard Elros. He asked straightforwardly, "What are you doing in the depths of this underground palace? If you don't share, how can we cooperate and assist you?"
Elros looked at the bronze coffin and unexpectedly turned to Lumian, "I wish to explore this forbidden area, known as the family's secret ground. Only a few are allowed inside to discover if the curse in our blood is connected to this place."
"You're an Einhorn. Do you genuinely consider yourself a Sauron family member?" Albus Medici taunted the lady.
This was both a dig at Elros for concealing the complete truth and an effort to sow discord between her and the Sauron family, making her aware of her place. So, there's no need to help the Sauron family conceal those secrets? Lumian discerned a double meaning in Albus's words.
This made him suspect that the other party might already be a Conspirer. His unlikable demeanor might be a disguised trap.
Unfazed, Elros sighed and said, "I bear half of the Sauron family's bloodline and am also a Hunter. I too will be haunted by that curse."
At this point, she turned her gaze towards Albus Medici and inquired, "What brings you to the depths of the underground palace? Don't tell me you're truly here to indulge in my naive

cousin's childish games?"
Albus responded in a half-sigh, half-sincere tone, "It's time for the Sauron family's curse to come to an end.
"And to break this curse, we must first fathom the essence and origin of this curse."
"Is that so?" Elros no longer displayed the same obedience and restraint.
Albus chuckled.
"You misunderstand. This is what we call the highest level of love, compassion, and benevolence. There are no limits, and I embody that."
I'd be a fool to take your word for it... Nevertheless, a true Conspirer doesn't just tell lies. They always reveal partial truths or even the whole truth. It's just that they omit the crucial parts... What was the truth in Albus Medici's response? Could it be that he genuinely wishes to help the Sauron family break the curse? If Elros were to say so, I'd believe her. How can an outsider like him, with no ties to the Sauron family, possess such kindness... Could it be a byproduct of pursuing his true objective? Lumian listened silently, dissecting the responses of his two "companions."
He didn't completely trust Elros either, suspecting that she was only revealing part of the truth.
Her abrupt change in demeanor and her command over the giant black spiders didn't seem like something a young girl living in her grandfather's house would be capable of.
Elros and Albus evaluated Lumian's explanation with identical, almost mocking smiles. Then, they both turned to him and asked in unison, "Why did you venture into the depths of the underground palace?"
"Me?" Lumian pointed at himself with his free left hand and responded honestly, "Someone entrusted me with investigating the Sauron family's decline and provided me with something."
The "someone" referred to Gardner Martin, and the "something" pertained to the dangerous corruption at 13 Avenue du Marché, although Lumian didn't disclose whether he had accepted it.
Albus smiled, acknowledging the lie while being aware of Lumian's "true identity."
Elros's eyes flickered, swiftly assessing which parts of Lumian's words were true and which were lies or incomplete.
After a moment of silence, Lumian sighed and chided both Albus and Elros.
"You Hunters, despite all you've said, not a single one of you took a step forward!"
The three of them remained at the door, waiting for one another to

step into the minefield.
"Talking to you guys is a waste of time." Albus sighed.
Nevertheless, he refrained from advancing. He clicked his tongue and added, "If only a Beyonder of the Sailor pathway were here at a time like this."
"Don't assume that Beyonders of the Sailor pathway are impulsive, reckless, and impatient. The potion may have an effect, but a person's character and experience are the most critical factors determining their actions. If you rely on such stereotypes for Beyonders of the Sailor pathway in the future, you may find yourself turned into a characteristic," Elros mocked Albus.
Lumian abstained from joining their debate and asked contemplatively, "If we hadn't chosen the middle path and the Door of Madness, would we still be here?"
"Yes, but some rooms are even more dangerous," Elros replied, her gaze fixed on the hall's surroundings.
Lumian nodded and asked, "Will we encounter demigod-level monsters?"
"Most of the demigod-level Beyonder characteristics have been retrieved. Many below the demigod level still linger in the underground palace, turning this place into a restricted hunting ground for members of the Sauron family seeking to improve themselves." Elros didn't seem inclined to conceal anything for the Sauron family.
Most of them have been retrieved... Does that mean some are still hidden in the depths of the underground palace? Did this coincide with the complete disappearance of some core members? Do the Sauron family not want to retrieve them, or are they incapable of doing so?
Indeed, Elros's description aligns with the Sauron family's current situation. There aren't many saint-level demigods, but it's still a substantial number. Many core members are scattered in the military, politics, and business world, holding significant influence... Are they lacking strength at a higher level? There are no angels, only a Grade 0 Sealed Artifact. Or is there just one angel? Lumian glanced around and realized that Elros and Albus remained remarkably patient, as if they had frozen in their spots.
Truth be told, Lumian was tempted to observe the outcomes of Elros and Albus, using their luck to gauge the danger of venturing deeper into the hall within the underground palace. However, given Elros's erratic temperament and the unnerving silence of Termiboros, he abandoned the idea.
Not only was it extremely risky, but it could also mislead him!
At that moment, Lumian suddenly felt a surge of danger.

He swiftly turned, his gaze following the glow of the carbide lamp, and Albus and Elros did the same.
In the diagonal corridor above, a hand with dark-red, almost black blood vessels extended from the darkness, pressing against the wall, illuminated by the faint yellowish glow.
Lumian's eyelids twitched as he recalled the image that had left the most profound mark on his nightmares, a result of the King's Pie game.
In the bronze coffin, surrounded by white candles, a hand with dark-red, nearly black blood vessels suddenly extended, gripping a shriveled, blackened heart, from which blood oozed!
Has the menacing creature from the bronze coffin surfaced? Before Lumian could activate Spirit World Traversal, an intense fear overwhelmed him, as if it wanted him to yield, and he involuntarily bent forward.
Instinctively resisting and struggling, he, along with Albus and Elros, stepped back and entered the hall.
In an instant, an illusion materialized before their eyes.
Lumian "witnessed" the hall enveloped in surreal purple flames, akin to an inferno from myths and legends.
At the heart of the purple flames was the bronze coffin. It had turned transparent, as if it had lost its physical form, revealing an iron-black ring pressing down on it.
The ring was embedded in the ground, with viscous, bottomless blood-colored spring water in its center. In the spring water, shriveled and blackened hearts bobbed up and down.
Bloodlines extended from the iron-black ring. Some wound around the base of the bronze coffin and burrowed into it, while others connected to the white candles.
In the next moment, Lumian heard a frenzied and violent illusory roar, as if emanating from deep underground.
His mind reeled, and he lost consciousness.
...
In the boundless darkness, the bewildered Lumian faintly heard a majestic voice, but the words eluded his understanding.
In his stupor, he strained to discern the voice. Aurore's melodious song and the ethereal flute of the shepherds echoed in his ears.
"I'm the elf of spring..."
As the voices gradually grew more distinct, Lumian sensed searing heat in his right palm.
The intensity of the sensation was almost tangible, accompanied by a burning pain.
Pain... Pain! Lumian snapped out of his fugue and forced his eyes open.

Before him, a crimson fireball blazed, and he found himself encased within a metal framework, his body held upright.
At that moment, a man dressed in black robes, sporting a vivid red beard that made him look like a human-lion hybrid, stood before the metal frame. He held softened candles and pressed them against Lumian's body, one by one.
Without hesitation, Lumian activated the black mark on his right shoulder.
With a ghostly flicker, he vanished from the metal frame, along with a portion of the candles.
Lumian materialized swiftly at the entrance to Red Swan Castle's underground labyrinth.
He hastily scanned the surroundings and breathed a sigh of relief, seeing that everything seemed normal.
Without delay, Lumian brushed the wax from his body and examined his belongings.
To his astonishment, not only were the original mystical items, gold coins, banknotes, and various lotions intact, but even the Beyonder characteristic of the wax figure artisan and the shriveled heart he had obtained in the underground palace remained.
No one searched me? Amid his bewilderment, fragmented memories flitted through his mind.
He recalled scenes of himself walking in silence through the darkness without his carbide lamp.
In those images, his countenance appeared lifeless and rigid, like that of a wax figure.
Eventually, he reached a room and nestled within a metal framework, calmly awaiting the wax figure artisan's transformation.
This doesn't resemble me at all... Lumian rubbed his throbbing head and opted to ascend the stairs, departing the underground labyrinth.
He promptly returned to the first-floor living room, where he found the poet, Iraeta, happily sipping absinthe.
"You're back too?" Iraeta inquired with curiosity.
"Yes," Lumian replied, having regained his composure, as he settled onto the sofa and offered a smile. "I got separated from them."
As he finished speaking, Albus, with his fiery red hair, made his appearance at the living room door.

Chapter 432: Beatdown

Albus was caught off guard when he spotted Lumian comfortably seated on the sofa.

"That was quick."

"You're not slow either," Lumian replied with a "kind" smile.

From his point of view, breaking free from the ethereal, underground roar and not turning into a wax statue indicated that Albus wasn't just an ordinary member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Perhaps the sinister corruption at 13 Avenue du Marché was helping him withstand that terrifying roar.

In contrast, Elros Einhorn, with her unique Sauron family bloodline, seemed more likely to emerge unscathed and return safely.

Albus flashed a smile, pulled up a chair, and casually enjoyed some refreshments as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. He signaled the servant nearby to replace his tea with a fresh cup of black tea.

After about four to five minutes, both Lumian and Albus simultaneously shifted their attention towards the living room door.

Elros, dressed in a comfortable dress, entered the room.

Seeing Lumian and Albus, she appeared surprised but not shocked. She quickly put on a polite, obedient smile.

Elros resumed her seat, becoming once again the reserved girl staying at her maternal grandfather's house.

Poet Iraeta seemed oblivious to the unusual atmosphere. He sipped his absinthe and discussed poetry writing with Lumian.

Fifteen minutes later, Count Poufer, decked out in a scarlet velvet coat, returned to the living room with Novelist Anori and Painter Mullen.

When Poufer laid eyes on Lumian, the owner of Red Swan Castle was visibly taken aback, nearly losing control of his expression.

He never anticipated encountering Ciel Dubois again, or more accurately, Ciel Dubois in his present state!

Shortly after, Poufer's gaze swept across Albus, Elros, and Iraeta, his face reflecting shock and suspicion as if he had stepped into a surreal dream.

"Ah, Poufer, you're finally back. We had given up on the adventure long ago and decided not to delve deeper into the dark maze." Albus set aside his mille-feuille and warmly welcomed him. "How did it go? Did you manage to locate the Count's crown?"

Instinctively, Poufer shifted his body to prevent Albus, with his hands smeared in pastry flakes, from giving him a hug.

He managed to force a smile and replied, "We had no luck finding it either. When did you get back?"
"Less than half an hour ago." Only then did Albus remember to smack his hands and brush off the pastry crumbs.
Lumian rose from his seat and inquired, "Where's Monsieur Ernst Young?"
Novelist Anori shook his head.
"He got separated from us. I hope he remembers to pull the bell rope and summon the servants to find him."
"That's correct. The servants in this castle know the underground palace better than I do," Poufer remarked, his expression returning to its usual state as he settled into an armchair.
Lumian was eager to return and confirm his discoveries. He glanced at the antique wall clock hanging on the wall and smiled at Poufer.
"I still have some matters to attend to, so I won't be attending the banquet tonight."
Poufer's mind seemed preoccupied, and he didn't press Lumian to stay. He rose once more and escorted Lumian to the living room's exit.
Lumian cast a grateful look at the owner of Red Swan Castle and shook his hand with sincerity.
"Count, thank you for a fantastic afternoon. I thoroughly enjoyed this game. I hope we can play it again."
From the depths of his heart, Lumian wanted to express his gratitude to Poufer Sauron. Not only had he provided an "opportunity" to digest the potion, but he had also "unveiled" the family's hunting grounds, making it easier for Lumian to locate suspected Beyonder creatures related to Conspirers without extensive searching.
How could he not show his appreciation?
Of course, Lumian genuinely desired to eliminate Poufer Sauron. If not for his uniqueness, he would have been turned into a wax statue.
Lumian's sole reason for not launching a direct attack wasn't concern about Sauron family retaliation or fear of spoiling the Iron and Blood Cross Order's plans. Instead, he instinctively believed that even though Poufer Sauron appeared to be an ordinary person or a relatively weak Beyonder with limited knowledge, if Lumian were to confront him, he might well be the one facing danger.
Count Poufer's expression soured as he received the heartfelt gratitude.
Lumian appeared oblivious to this and reiterated his desire to partake in another underground palace adventure game. With

that, he turned and exited the living room, leaving Poufer Sauron perplexed and watchful.
After departing from Red Swan Castle and boarding the four-wheeled, four-seater borrowed from Gardner Martin, Lumian's smile faded, replaced by a solemn countenance.
At the conclusion of this underground palace adventure, he had gained a clear understanding of the disparity between his strength and that of higher-level entities. With a mere illusory roar, he lost consciousness and self-control, unable to resist.
Only thanks to Mr. Fool's seal, Termiboros's presence, and the lingering aura of the Blood Emperor Alista Tudor did he manage to escape with his life.
My Sequence is still too low... Lumian sighed inwardly and closed his eyes, reflecting on the adventure's details.
...
Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, 11 Rue des Fontaines.
Gardner Martin leisurely roamed through the armor and weapons on display in the hall, running his fingers over the metallic textures as Lumian recounted his encounters in the depths of the underground palace. He described the room with the wax statues, the wax statue artisan, the mutated black spider, the iron soldiers, the bronze coffin, the white candles, and the eerie roar.
However, Lumian omitted the details of how he had escorted Poet Iraeta back to the underground palace's entrance. He also left out the part about burning the wax statues and him murdering the wax statue artisan.
Finally, he couldn't conceal his anger, frustration, and perplexity.
"Commanding Officer, didn't you promise to secretly watch to prevent any mishaps? If I hadn't inexplicably awakened, I'd be a wax statue now!
"Did you use Albus to keep an eye on me?"
Lumian's questioning tone didn't seem to provoke Gardner Martin. The latter turned to him, his smile widening as he spoke calmly.
"I was indeed observing from the shadows."
At this point, his smile grew even more, but his voice remained composed.
"I witnessed you escorting the poet back to the underground palace's entrance. I saw you set fire to the wax statues in that room and detonate the wax statue artisan's head."
Wh— Lumian's eyes narrowed, and a shiver ran down his spine as his hair stood on end.
He blurted out, "Albus is already back?"
How did the Boss find out about my actions?
Could he truly be trailing me in secret or monitoring my every move

in the underground maze?
How did he do it? I didn't notice at all!
Gardner Martin chuckled.
"Albus hasn't returned yet."
It wasn't Albus? That's right, Albus had no knowledge of my actions regarding the wax statue artisan's demise. No one else was present... *How did the Boss discover it?* Lumian's usual tendency to underestimate Gardner Martin vanished, replaced by a sense that the head of the Savoie Mob, the Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, possessed more mystery and power than he initially believed.
Previously, perhaps Madam Magician of the Tarot Club and Mr. K of the Aurora Order had displayed abilities that Lumian found beyond imagination or awe-inspiring. Therefore, when facing Gardner Martin, who appeared to be the weakest of the three "superiors," Lumian had always considered him less formidable. He even believed that if they were within a five-meter range, he might have a chance to eliminate this Commanding Officer.
Now, from the looks of it, Lumian wasn't confident.
Considering that Gardner Martin might have revealed this information to unnerve him, Lumian didn't attempt to conceal his changing expressions and body language.
Gardner Martin observed Lumian's bewildered and fearful expression and added with a smile, "Do you really think you woke up for no reason?"
Whoa, so you're the one who helped? If I hadn't heard the grandiose voice, Aurore's humming, and the conversation with the people in Cordu and felt the burning pain in my right palm, I would have believed you... In essence, the corruption at 13 Avenue du Marché could have helped me break free from that state, but the Boss had intentionally left it ambiguous. He wants me to believe that he had played a role. This Hunter didn't lie, but he certainly didn't disclose the whole truth. How much of what he said was based on what he saw with his own eyes, and how much was gathered through other means? Lumian's thoughts raced as he bowed his head.
"Thank you, Commanding Officer."
Gardner Martin nodded warmly with a smile and said, "We've gained something from this operation. At the very least, we know that there are terrifying items sealed deep in Red Swan Castle's underground palace. Do you want to exchange them for rewards or save them to trade for valuable items later, such as higher Sequence potions?"
Lumian had accumulated a sum of 20,000 verl d'or over the past

month through Gardner Martin's funds, his "salary" from Salle de Bal Brise, and his earnings from acting. Money wasn't an immediate concern.
He pondered for a moment.
"Let's save them for now."
As he spoke, he presented the Beyonder characteristic of the wax statue artisan and other items to Gardner Martin and inquired, "Boss, can I use these to concoct the Conspirer potion?"
Gardner Martin examined the shrunken blood-colored brain and the shriveled, blackened heart for a moment.
"When combined, they can be used to concoct the Conspirer potion, but they will have additional Hunter, Provoker, and Pyromaniac characteristics compared to ordinary ingredients. You need to be very confident before using them.
"Right, this heart still retains traces of the Sauron family's bloodline, which might affect your advancement to some extent. If you're not confident, I can provide you with a Conspirer potion in exchange for these ingredients and make up the difference. Consider it a partial reward."
In essence, ordinary Black Hunting Spiders and Sphinxes only possess the Conspirer Beyonder characteristic, excluding the ones from before. The wax statue artisan and the mutated black spider were like two halves of a Conspirer. When combined, they formed a complete Sequence 9 to 6 Beyonder... Lumian grasped the situation and smiled.
"It sounds like it will make me stronger. I'd like to see if I can handle the associated risks."
Gardner Martin didn't push further and allowed Lumian to depart.
...
Upon returning to Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian took his place at his desk and began writing a letter to Madam Magician.

Chapter 433: Secret Past

Lumian diligently wrote down every detail of the events that had unfolded from the moment Lumian set foot in Red Swan Castle. He condensed the communications, focusing on the key points.

He had a strong sense that the Sauron family's underground maze concealed a crucial secret. Fearing that he might lack the knowledge and write off problematic parts as normal, inadvertently overlooking something, he decided to mention everything and allow Madam Magician to assess it herself.

It took Lumian half an hour to draft the letter.

He then closed the curtains and performed a ritual, summoning the "doll" messenger.

After nearly twenty minutes, the messenger returned with two folded squares of letter paper.

There are actually two pages. She places quite a lot of importance on this... Lumian contemplated for a moment before silently unfolding them.

"Gardner Martin is correct. The so-called wax statue artisan and mutated black spider are actually an enhanced Sphinx and Black Hunting Spider respectively. They contain Beyonder characteristics of the previous Sequences. What he didn't mention is that using the heart not only affects your advancement but is also linked to a special ritual that causes Beyonders who use it to merge with some of the Sauron family's bloodline, potentially subjecting them to a curse. However, for you, there's nothing to worry about. You've already taken the role of emperor during the King's Pie game. Why should you fear this?

"That tiny trace of the Sauron family's bloodline might have an undiscovered significance at some point."

Undiscovered significance... Is Madam Magician hinting at something she observed in her astromancy? If I genuinely use that withered heart to concoct the potion, not only will I possess a hint of the Blood Emperor's aura, but I'll also have a bit of the Sauron family's bloodline. What kind of f*cking amalgamation would this be!? Lumian mercilessly mocked himself.

If he further possessed an Einhorn bloodline, Lumian wouldn't even dare to imagine whether he'd be considered a prodigy in the Hunter pathway or simply mediocre.

After this self-mockery, Lumian continued to read.

"You've gained a lot from this adventure. Combining your experiences, what you've witnessed, what you've heard, and what you've encountered in the previous two King's Pie games, my initial assessment is that the formidable angel Vermonda

Champagne Sauron from 200 years ago is still alive. He resides somewhere underground in that chamber, confined within a bronze coffin, surrounded by white candles, iron-black rings, blood-colored spring water, and the hearts extracted from the Sauron family's core members through a unique ritual. Even the entire underground maze is linked to a perilous Sealed Artifacts, designed to limit Vermonda Sauron's movements to the greatest extent.

"This is the first victim of the Sauron family's curse. Why did He vanish suddenly, why did He descend underground, and why does He remain alive? It has had a profound impact on generations of Red Swan Castle and the Sauron family, driving them to the brink of insanity. This is a crucial matter that requires further clarification. It's the real cause behind the Sauron family's decline.

"It's too dangerous for you. At your Sequence, you would find it extremely challenging to investigate. As you've experienced, even hearing Vermonda Sauron's voice causes temporary disorientation, leaving you in a daze, and the wax statue artisan would reconstruct you. This prevents you from getting close to the bronze coffin and the seal over it.

"Of course, once you possess a trace of the Sauron family's bloodline and master the special ritual that Poufer Sauron once underwent, you might have a chance to enter that chamber. But all in all, I advise against taking this risk until you're prepared to advance to Sequence 4 and approach the threshold of godhood. If Gardner Martin assigns a similar mission in the future, just perform it perfunctorily.

"Considering your contributions, the next time you require a potion formula or specific ingredients, feel free to contact me directly. You'll receive a substantial discount."

Angel? Lumian's eyelids twitched.

The mysterious and missing Sauron family ancestor, Vermonda, was, in fact, a formidable angel!

The voice that had instantaneously robbed him of consciousness and nearly caused him to faint belonged to a genuine Mythical Creature!

Furthermore, this angel remained in a state of complete madness and needed to be sealed.

The Sauron family's underground maze is indeed a perilous place, but it also conceals a wealth of "treasures"... Lumian muttered with a mix of lingering fear and anticipation.

In reality, even without Madam Magician's advice, he had no desire to risk approaching the chamber with the bronze coffin.

What if Poufer Sauron was waiting there next time, and he ended up

losing himself, only to be killed?
It appeared that the mission to investigate the cause of the Sauron family's decline could only progress once he grew stronger.
Of course, Gardner Martin could handle it himself or seek assistance from the vice presidents of the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
After digesting these paragraphs, Lumian exhaled and continued reading the last part of the letter.
"Albus Medici isn't as straightforward as he may seem—not just a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order. His last name is self-explanatory.
"In ancient times, before Blood Emperor Alista Tudor became the Red Priest, the God of War had another name. He was one of the eight Kings of Angels who had once served under the Ancient Sun God, known as the Red Angel or War Angel Medici.
"One of His duties was to watch over and instruct Amon."
King of Angels... *How do they differ from regular angels?* The Ancient Sun God's impact on the future was profoundly significant. The one revered by the Aurora Order, some of the seven orthodox gods, Amon, and the former God of War, Medici... Lumian pondered, realizing that many issues of the current era might trace back to events two to three thousand years ago, linked to the Ancient Sun God's downfall.
His curiosity was piqued, and he read the remainder of the content with greater focus than before.
"Red Angel Medici, the Sauron family, and the Einhorn family's most ancient ancestor all perished simultaneously under Alista Tudor and the nobles' combined efforts, giving rise to the Red Priest. However, after the Blood Emperor's demise, the Sauron and Einhorn families reclaimed their Beyonder characteristics.
"A King of Angels doesn't meet His end so easily. For some reason, the Red Angel, Sauron, and Einhorn merged into a potent evil spirit, a fusion of malevolence. Just a few years ago, this evil spirit found a means to break free from the geographical confines, vanishing without a trace from its place of origin.
"Red Angel Medici left behind numerous descendants and established a secretive angelic lineage, with many residing in Bansy Harbor. Yes, the same Bansy Harbor I mentioned earlier, which was greatly corrupted and directly annihilated by the Church of Storms. However, over the past one to two thousand years, members of the Medici family have gradually departed the island and returned to the Northern Continent. Albus Medici should be a direct descendant of one such individual.
"It's reasonable to suspect that Albus may have already crossed

paths with this evil spirit. Removing the Sauron family's curse could be part of the evuk spirit's agenda, and the portion linked to Red Angel Medici likely desires the Sauron family's hoarded possessions. They also seek to uncover what Vermonda Sauron experienced.

"As for Albus's presence at the Sacred Heart Cloister, it might be due to the evil spirit guiding him or the Iron and Blood Cross Order sensing an anomaly and sending him to establish contact with the monks and gather information.

"Don't worry, Miss Justice and Susie will keep a close watch."

There's an issue with the Sacred Heart Cloister... Lumian hadn't foreseen problems with the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's largest cloister in Trier, but Madam Magician's words had unmistakably highlighted this situation.

Previously, when he speculated about Albus's purpose at the Sacred Heart Cloister, he had engaged in extensive analysis, yet he hadn't contemplated an issue with the cloister itself. He had merely assumed that Gardner Martin was seeking to understand certain matters there and gauge the inclinations and attitudes of various Eternal Blazing Sun Church factions.

Combined with Madam Magician's statement that someone from the Tarot Club was monitoring a potential lead, Lumian now suspected that the issue with the Sacred Heart Cloister might be linked to the worship of an evil god!

A substantial crisis is brewing... Lumian's sense of urgency surged.

At the end of the letter, Madam Magician wrote:

"Perhaps Gardner Martin's ability to 'see' something in the underground maze is related to his exposure to the corruption at 13 Avenue du Marché. It could also be due to the item smuggled in through Rat. I don't know what it is exactly.

"Consume the potion soon and advance to Sequence 6. If the catastrophe is averted unsuccessfully in the future, teleport out of Trier with the Two of Cups and your friends, or seek refuge in Mr. Fool's cathedral."

Lumian read the reply and contemplated it for a moment, silently watching it consumed by the crimson flames.

...

3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Apartment 601.

Franca, clad in a cotton shirt and light-colored pants, looked surprised when she saw Lumian outside the door.

"Didn't Poufer Sauron's banquet just begin?"

Why did he return so suddenly?

"I ventured into Red Swan Castle's underground maze this afternoon and gained quite a bit," Lumian replied with a smile as

he entered the room and closed the door. "I need your help now."
"What did you gain? And how can I help?" Franca inquired, a mix of curiosity and confusion in her expression.
Lumian chose to address the latter question.
"Help me hold something. If something goes wrong after I consume the potion, open it immediately."
"Consume the potion?" Franca was taken aback. "Have you finished digesting your Pyromaniac potion?"
"The digestion is complete," Lumian affirmed with a smile.
Franca instinctively asked, "Have you gathered all the ingredients for your Conspirer potion?"
"Yes," Lumian replied with a grin.
"..." Franca couldn't help but mutter, "You've only been out for an afternoon, but it feels like you've been gone for two to three weeks..."
Not only had the Pyromaniac potion been fully digested, but he had also acquired most of the ingredients for the subsequent potion!
Lumian showed an unusual sincerity as he explained, "This is all thanks to nature—no, thanks to Poufer Sauron."

Chapter 434: Utilizing the Special Environment

In a dim tunnel supported by stone pillars, Franca, indifferent to the presence of carbide lamps, turned to Lumian and expressed her concern.

"Are you absolutely sure there won't be any issues with using that heart to advance? Even if you don't appear afraid of the Sauron family's curse, it could still affect your condition after consuming the potion and potentially lead to failure. Honestly, Gardner's proposal is worth considering. Consuming an additional Sequence 9 to Sequence 7 potion will make you stronger, but not by much. There won't be any qualitative changes, so it's better to take a safer route."

The Demoness of Pleasure had already learned about Lumian's experiences in Red Swan Castle's underground maze and most of the information from Madam Magician's letter.

While she was awed by the special soldiers' existence and the frenzied cries of the uncontrollable angel, she couldn't help but be concerned about Lumian's plan to use the Beyonder characteristic of the wax statue artisan and the shriveled heart of the mutated black spider to concoct the potion.

Lumian, holding a carbide lamp, chuckled.

"I'm doing it because I'm more than confident."

Franca remained skeptical. "Do you have a method to negate the influence of the heart's remaining bloodline?"

At this point, it was as if she snapped out of her reverie.

"Where are we headed? Aren't you going to drink the potion? Just find a quiet spot. There's no need to keep wandering underground, right?"

Lumian chuckled.

"It's precisely because the destination is special that I believe I can minimize the influence of the Sauron family's residual bloodline in the heart."

Simultaneously, it would reduce the risk of the corruption in his body during the advancement!

Franca's curiosity was piqued. "Where are we going?"

Lumian replied with a smile, "You'll find out when we get there."

"Dammit! I hate people like you who leave sentences hanging!" Franca couldn't resist cursing.

...

After more than half an hour, Franca pointed ahead to a naturally formed and modified stone door cave, her expression a mix of surprise and realization. She asked, "Is this the destination you were talking about?"

The entrance was marked with numerous engravings of skulls, skeletal arms, sunflowers, and symbols related to steam.
This marked the entrance to the catacombs, leading to the Death Empire!
"Somewhere inside," Lumian replied. He retrieved a white candle from the satchel containing the Flog boxing gloves and tossed it to Franca. With a smile, he added, "I want to consume the potion under the watchful eyes of God."
"Under the gaze of God?" Franca eyed Lumian suspiciously, wondering if he had succumbed to the peculiar habits of an Astrologer.
He didn't seem to be speaking in a straightforward manner!
Lumian chose not to elaborate. Instead, he lit a white candle and ventured into the catacombs.
As usual, the administrators challenged them, and they made their assurances. The two eventually reached the third level of the catacombs, where they encountered a sacrificial pillar composed of two weathered boulders, surrounded by a small square.
Upon entering this remarkably clean area, Franca had an epiphany.
"Are you trying to exploit the uniqueness of this place?"
She had previously explored the catacombs but hadn't ventured deep into the third level. Lumian had only mentioned that there was a square here with two sacrificial pillars symbolizing the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery.
Under the protection of these two pillars, even if the candle flames in their hands were extinguished, the individuals in the square wouldn't be plunged into darkness, and there wouldn't be any trace of their presence erased.
"Yes." Lumian smiled.
He handed the white candle to Franca and approached the mottled pillar adorned with symbols like the Sun Sacred Emblem, sunflowers, and radiating lines. He extended his arms reverently and offered a sincere prayer.
"Praise the Sun!"
His plan was to utilize the catacombs' uniqueness and the protective power of the sacrificial square to suppress the influence of the Sauron family's residual bloodline and the corruption of Inevitability within his body.
From his experiences, a substantial part of these influences stemmed from external sources and the outside world. For instance, the sealed Vermonda Sauron deep within the underground palace and the power of Inevitability beyond the barrier.

Without these external influences, all that would remain was the corruption within his body. Lumian had endured this during his previous three advancements and believed it was manageable. This was because the external support this corruption received would be weakened by the catacombs' uniqueness and the protection of the sacrificial pillars.
The initial idea for this plan had been inspired by the creation of the Beyonder accessory, Beatrice's Necklace. Madam Magician had mentioned that specific environments could sever connections and prevent the power of a boon from returning to its source, such as the area around the Samaritan Women's Spring.
Lumian believed that although the sacrificial square in the catacombs might not be as special as the area around the Samaritan Women's Spring, it wouldn't be too far off. After considering the catacombs' peculiarity and the protection of the Eternal Blazing Sun sacrificial pillar, the external influence would undoubtedly be significantly reduced.
Furthermore, the sanctity of the sacrificial square stemmed from the protection of orthodox gods. Lumian didn't need to worry about any backlash from consuming the potion to advance here.
Franca watched in momentary surprise as Lumian genuinely praised the Sun.
He was truly under the "watchful eye" of a deity!
But isn't he afraid of being directly purged as a follower of Mr. Fool?
After the prayer, Lumian returned to Franca and handed her an exquisite perfume bottle.
"What's this?" Franca inquired, puzzled.
"Gray amber perfume," Lumian explained with a flicker of emotion in his eyes under the candlelight. "After I consume the potion, watch my reaction closely. If you sense anything amiss, unscrew the cap and bring the bottle to my nose."
Initially, he would have done this himself, but this time, given the influence of the Sauron family's residual bloodline and his status as a Mid-Sequence Beyonder, he was concerned that the situation might worsen. He might not have the strength to open the perfume bottle. Additionally, if he had used it from the beginning, his subconscious might remember that he had created it, potentially negating the intended effect.
"Alright." Seeing that Lumian had no intention of explaining, Franca suppressed her curiosity and refrained from inquiring.
Lumian glanced at the broad stone steps leading to the catacombs' second level and added,
"One more thing, you need to ensure that the tourists don't disturb

me."
"Do you think I'm stupid?" Franca rolled her eyes.
Did you really need to ask?
Without further delay, Lumian retrieved a beer mug with a crystal-like appearance from his satchel.
Using a measuring cylinder, he began the process. First, he poured a total of 80 milliliters of the wax statue artisan's dark-red blood into the mug. Then, he added the mutated black spider's poison gland, 10 grams of amber powder, and two white oak fruits he had collected over a month ago.
These ingredients, infused with potent spirituality and corresponding symbols, didn't dissolve instantly; instead, they created a dark foam on the surface.
Lumian gently submerged the blood-colored object that resembled a shrunken human brain and the withered, black heart into the mixture.
With a sizzling sound, a crimson-tinged mist diffused and then receded. All the solid ingredients rapidly disintegrated and merged, causing the potion's color to intensify.
Bubbles rose and burst until the liquid inside the beer mug turned an iron-black hue, with a tinge of reddish rust.
Observing this transformation, Franca mumbled softly, "Indeed, one's heart is tainted when one employs battle strategies. Even the potion is tainted..."
Contemplating the dark, blood-colored concoction, Lumian removed his satchel and military flask, setting them aside.
After handing Lie to Franca, he took a slow, deliberate breath and composed himself.
After 20 to 30 seconds, he sat cross-legged, his wrist steady as he picked up the beer mug and drank the potion without hesitation.
The potion had a strong rusty taste, cold like a serpent slithering in the darkness, slippery and icy.
However, Lumian's body didn't burn as it had before. Instead, he felt a chilling sensation, as if all the flames had been absorbed by the potion.
Simultaneously, his head throbbed with a familiar pain, and his vision quickly blurred. All the thoughts and information he knew materialized, intertwining in the form of miniature pictures, forming layers of interconnected spiderwebs.
This tore Lumian's mind apart. Terrifying ravings, seemingly emanating from an infinite distance while simultaneously echoing in his ears, were accompanied by violent and frenzied emotions.
Yet, the pain from the former didn't render Lumian nearly

unconscious. He instinctively rolled, his expression involuntarily contorted with malevolence. His hands clenched tightly, and he couldn't help but groan in pain. The latter was within the tolerance of an Alms Monk.
Lumian's right palm felt a slight warmth from the stimulation.
Finally, the inferno reached him. This time, it converged within Lumian's mind, unreal and illusory.
Franca, who had been watching closely, wanted to open the perfume bottle several times, but each time she thought about it, Lumian returned to normal.
The entire ordeal lasted only 20 to 30 seconds. Lumian's clenched hands slowly relaxed, and his contorted facial muscles gradually returned to their original positions.
Phew... Lumian exhaled a scorching breath and opened his eyes.
"Did it work?" Franca asked subconsciously.
Lumian, experiencing sharp pain in his head and body, responded with a wry smile, "If it hadn't worked, you would've already started fighting the out-of-control me."
This had been even easier than his previous three advancements.
"Who knows if a Conspirer's loss of control is an act of pretending to be a normal person and secretly attacking me..." Franca couldn't help but argue, even though she knew she had spoken out of turn.
Lumian raised his hand to rub his temples. Despite the pain, his thoughts seemed clearer than ever.
He quickly recalled the events that had occurred and sensed that some of the details might be problematic.
This was something he hadn't noticed before.
For instance, according to his nightmares, Iraeta, the poet who frequently participated in King's Pie games, should have transformed into a half-wax statue, gone insane, harmed himself or those around him at any moment. Yet, not only was he unscathed, but he had also entered the problematic Sacred Heart Cloister and coincidentally encountered Albus Medici!

Chapter 435: An Early Acting Principle

In the nightmare, Poet Iraeta failed to escape his deranged fate. It's not that he isn't affected by the King's Pie game, but that he hasn't shown it yet. Just like Painter Mullen and Novelist Anori...

In other words, the likelihood of him already being anomalous is very low, nothing like Elros and Albus...

He has a facilitator behind him, ensuring his current safety and allowing him to transmit effective information? If that's the case, who is the facilitator? Someone from the Sacred Heart Cloister? Did he make many similar arrangements after discovering the turbulent undercurrents in the cloister? Lumian's thoughts raced faster than usual, and he quickly made a guess.

He retracted his thoughts and focused on observing the changes in his body after consuming the potion.

In addition to his enhanced insight, sharper and clearer thinking, and a series of specific manifestations, like improved intelligence and the ability to fabricate excuses to convince others, he also had superpowers in misdirection, confusion, and deception.

These abilities were core components of conspiracies, but a qualified Conspirer would only employ them subtly and at critical moments. Under normal circumstances, they tried their best to rely on their wits to prevent targets with backgrounds from detecting the existence of superpowers and seeing through their schemes.

Similar to Misleading, there's another ability called Incitement or Instigation. This is very much like the Demoness' Instigation. And when Lumian played Pyromaniac, he consciously incited others to ignite the flames in their hearts.

Lumian couldn't help but mutter, Is my acting too advanced, or is the Hunter pathway deepening in certain concepts? Is acting in a previous stage an ability at the later stages?

Yes, the Conspirer potion revolves around conspiracies. There's no qualitative improvement in combat...

After repeated confirmation, Lumian realized that his physique had improved to a certain extent, and his precise control over flames had improved. He no longer had to rely on Fire Raven, Fireball, Spear, Fire Serpent, and Fire Wall every time. He could casually shape the flames into different forms, such as whips and sabers.

Similarly, the difficulty of repeatedly compressing the crimson flames to form incandescent white flames decreased. The time required was significantly reduced and, depending on the flame's specific appearance and energy density, it ranged from one to

three seconds.
In addition, Lumian could temporarily merge his body with fire. He could use fireballs and other projectiles to quickly shift positions, either escaping the enemy's attack range or closing the distance. This allowed Lumian to have more options in battle. He didn't have to rely on Spirit World Traversal every time.
Conspirer had also enhanced his spirituality. Although Lumian hadn't experimented, he believed that at his limit, he could complete Spirit World Traversal six times, up from the original four times.
Lumian sniffed and unsurprisingly caught a whiff of something further away, discerning more details.
This was due to the enhancement of a Conspirer's information-gathering abilities. It would inevitably enhance their five senses and spiritual perception.
That's about it... Lumian stood up, his body suddenly enveloped in flowing crimson flames.
He transformed into a fireball and flew away with a whoosh.
In less than ten meters, he landed on the ground, and flames dispersed around him.
The current limit is ten meters. It will gradually increase as the potion is digested... Lumian nodded indiscernibly and returned to the spot where he had discarded the black satchel and the military flask.
He was now fully aware that he was already a Sequence 6 Conspirer.
Franca held Lie and the gray amber perfume and asked with curiosity and concern, "Very cool... How do you feel?"
Lumian pondered silently for a few seconds before saying, "The changes in my abilities aren't as much or as strong as I imagined."
"That's normal," Franca consoled, empathetic. "For most pathways, there are only two qualitative changes below the high Sequences. For the Hunter pathway, one is at Sequence 7 Pyromaniac, and the other is at Sequence 5 Reaper. Regardless, each potion brings about new abilities or strengthening of the original abilities. If used well, it's normal for a Sequence 6 to kill a Sequence 5."
Lumian nodded slowly, deep in thought.
"I also discovered that I've been acting as a Conspirer for a long time..."
When he was wandering, he relied on ruthlessness and conspiracies to fend off humans who were older than him for food and a place to sleep in the cold. When he was in Cordu, every prank could be regarded as a conspiracy with low malice. After leaving Cordu, he had been trapped in conspiracies over the past

few months, either screwing over his targets or falling into the traps of others...
Although Lumian didn't digest a portion of the Conspirer potion on the spot, it made his condition much better compared to when he first consumed the Pyromaniac potion. The potion's potency didn't dissipate without control.
He didn't feel like a Conspirer who had just advanced after consuming a potion. He felt more like a Sequence 6 Beyonder who had some time to adapt to it.
Simultaneously, he deduced two acting principles from his past experiences:
Firstly, a Conspirer's core lay in their intelligence, not superpowers!
Secondly, the key to a conspiracy lay in concealing one's true motives!
In the past, the acting principles were derived step by step, leading to a substantial digestion of the potion. In contrast, these two acting principles were accumulated from past experiences. Although they couldn't directly result in the digestion of the potion, they facilitated Lumian's subsequent acting, reducing the time it would take for him to fully digest the potion. To put it simply, he might only need to spend half his energy to achieve twice the effect.
Lumian had originally believed that digesting the Conspirer potion would take at least half a year, but from the looks of it, perhaps three months would suffice. Of course, the prerequisite was that there would always be a chance to act and conclude a new acting principle.
Franca shared his sentiments.
"That's right. Just like how it was easy for me to act as an Assassin. I had too much 'experience.'"
When she said the word "experience," her voice involuntarily softened, as if she felt a little guilty.
Lumian paid no mind to this detail. After stuffing the items on the ground into his black satchel, he retrieved Lie, the gray amber perfume, and the burning white candle.
Seeing that her companion was indeed fine, Franca heaved a sigh of relief and said, "It's a good thing to advance before the catastrophe. Damn it, if it weren't for Browns Sauron being petty and jealous of me, preventing me from attending the orgies, my Pleasure potion would have been significantly digested. Hmph, I'll have her experience true pleasure later!"
For the 103rd time, she cursed Browns Sauron.
Franca then asked, "Are we going to make a move on those

individuals next?"
These individuals referred to members of the Sinners organization. Over the past month, Lumian had repeatedly sought to capture the Sinners' liaison through Guillaume Bénet's widow, Paulina. First, he sought to uncover the Sanson family, seeking revenge for his sister and tracking Loki's whereabouts—they had a deep connection to Loki. Perhaps they knew the location of the castle where Loki had been resurrected. Second, the Sinners organization also believed in an evil god. It was possible they knew a little about Trier's cultists' abnormal silence. Perhaps it could help Lumian and the others figure out the source of the disaster and the essence of the outbreak.
Back then, Lumian hadn't figured out the pattern of the Sinners organization's liaison, so he had postponed any operation. Later, he planned to wait until he advanced to Sequence 6 and gained greater strength before taking action. After all, other members of the Sinners organization weren't like Padre Guillaume Bénet, whose contract abilities and corresponding negative effects were grasped by him, allowing him to prepare in advance. If the contract abilities of the evil god bestowed synergized well, they would be quite a tough nut.
Of course, Lumian had no intention of completely annihilating the Sinners organization by relying solely on his small team. It was a cult with a saint. His plan was to capture the liaison and obtain the information he needed before calling the Tarot Club for reinforcements.
"That's right." Lumian nodded with a smile and replied to Franca, "In two days, the Sinners' liaison will likely visit Madame Paulina again."
"Yes, I hope he knows something." Although Franca didn't think she could prevent the potential disaster, she still hoped to do something.
She paused for a moment and continued, "Take Jenna to Lavigny Docks tomorrow and introduce her to Mr. Fool's faith."
"Alright." Lumian had such thoughts to begin with.
...
The following morning, Lumian knocked on Apartment 601's door.
He glanced at Jenna, who had changed into a light-blue dress, and smiled.
"I need your help with something."
"Me?" Jenna pointed at herself and turned to Franca. "How can I help?"
"Don't ask. You'll find out when you get there." Lumian couldn't be bothered to find an excuse.

Jenna's eyes darted around in confusion.
"Dammit! Can't you make yourself clear?" As she cursed, she gestured to Franca, indicating her helplessness.
Then, she followed Lumian out of the apartment door.
Franca fell into deep thought when she saw this scene.
...
In the four-wheeled, four-seater rental carriage, Lumian didn't mention the purpose of his trip. He chatted with Jenna about the drunkards at Salle de Bal Brise and the actors at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. The atmosphere was relaxed and cheerful, as if they were on a school autumn outing.
Jenna didn't inquire further and displayed considerable patience.
Finally, the rental carriage arrived at Lavigny Docks. Lumian paid the fare of 1.75 verl d'or, opened the door, and agilely leaped out.
Jenna moved to the carriage door, but before she could gracefully leap down, her eyes narrowed as she let out Franca's usual sigh.
"Wow!"
Lumian followed her gaze and saw an ancient-looking three-masted sailboat parked at Lavigny Docks, clearly lagging behind the times.
Such a boat was rare at Lavigny Docks, but those who had grown up reading or listening to the The Adventurer series found it oddly familiar.
These great pirates seemed to be fond of such boats.

Chapter 436: Open and Inclusive Faith

Lumian had seen a similar three-masted sailboat in the illustrations of The Adventurer series. It stood out amidst the bustling Lavigny Docks, a contrast to the inland steamboats, and drew the attention of passersby.

Simultaneously, Lumian felt a warmth in his right palm, which then subsided.

What's happening? Has the lingering aura of the Blood Emperor experienced a change under stimulus? This... this feels like a kind of resonance... Lumian pondered in surprise and confusion.

Could there be a connection between this ancient three-masted sailboat and Blood Emperor Alista Tudor?

As Lumian stared at the sailboat, Jenna disembarked from the carriage and playfully remarked, "You didn't bring me here just to show me this vintage pirate ship, did you?"

She had read the first two serialized volumes of The Adventurer series in the newspapers. Books had always been expensive in her family, and when her father's work-related compensation didn't arrive after his unfortunate death, her reading opportunities grew scarce. She'd occasionally find old newspapers used to paste on the wall or for other purposes and read until sunset.

With the presence of street bards and her mother's bedtime stories, her spirit remained far from desolate.

Since arriving in the market district and becoming an underground singer, Jenna had found a means to earn a substantial income. She had even saved up to purchase a pirated copy of The Adventurer series from an underground bookseller to finally appreciate the intricate illustrations. This endeavor often made her feel remorseful for Madam Fors Wall. She planned to buy an authentic set once she had cleared all her debts.

To her surprise, her debts only seemed to accumulate.

Lumian withdrew his gaze and replied with a teasing grin, "Consider this a bonus."

The two of them stood on the harbor's edge, discussing the disparities between the ancient sailboat and the illustrations from The Adventurer series.

After a while, Lumian led Jenna to the unassuming The Fool's cathedral.

Jenna looked up at the bell tower and steeple atop the four-story building, examining the silver symbol comprising an incomplete Pupil-less Eye and a section of Contorted Lines. Baffled, she inquired, "Is this a cathedral?"

Aren't cathedrals supposed to be grander?

The cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church in the market district and Quartier du Jardin Botanique was far more magnificent and sacred in comparison.
"Yes," Lumian affirmed, leading the way inside.
Jenna trailed closely behind, increasingly surprised by the cathedral's simplicity.
The stained glass windows were scarce, and there was no ornate gilding to be found. The cathedral lacked intricate machinery. The only semblance of religion lay in the massive murals, which seemed to favor muted colors and subdued illumination.
The most striking feature of the cathedral was the large, numerous windows. Even on the ground floor, the interior was awash with natural light.
Jenna's gaze flitted over the murals, and she instinctively felt that they symbolized guidance and redemption.
It was slightly past 10 a.m., and the cathedral's attendance was sparse. It was silent, exuding a sense of serenity.
Lumian guided Jenna to the third row of pews facing the altar.
He surveyed their surroundings, his gaze resting on The Fool's Sacred Emblem before him. In a solemn tone, he disclosed,
"You should be aware that Franca and I are keeping something from you. There are some secrets we haven't shared with you."
"Yeah," Jenna nodded gently, awaiting Lumian's explanation.
Lumian continued, "As you can tell, Franca and I aren't related. She and my sister Aurore are close friends who share common interests. Loki and I Know Someone, whom we dealt with previously, are also part of this group, but they betrayed others, causing a disaster in Cordu and costing my sister her life."
"I see..." Jenna replied, having refrained from delving too deeply previously but having a vague understanding.
Lumian's gaze remained fixed on Mr. Fool's altar.
"There's another connection between Franca and me. We don't believe in the Eternal Blazing Sun or the God of Steam and Machinery..."
Jenna couldn't help but chuckle.
"I've already guessed it. When have any of you gone to church? I don't usually see you praying at fixed times!
"At least you know which street Église Saint-Robert is on. Franca might not even know where the cathedral's door opens to."
She, on the other hand, prayed, listened to the sermons, and attended Mass at least once a week. This was both a display of piety to the Purifiers and a habit of faith from all these years.
The only downside was that she often sang at Salle de Bal Brise until midnight before returning to Rue des Blouses Blanches to

sleep. She couldn't get up to welcome the morning sun and dawn, so she could only set a fixed prayer time for noon.
"No, I'm not going because I'm a wanted criminal. I can barely be considered a believer in the Eternal Blazing Sun," Lumian replied with a smile. Then, he said solemnly, "Franca and I believe in this orthodox god, the great Mr. Fool."
Lumian pressed his hand to his chest and whispered solemnly, "Praise The Fool!"
The Fool... Jenna found the deity's name peculiar.
After a moment of thought, she asked, "The Fool from tarot cards?"
"Yes, you've guessed it correctly," Lumian affirmed.
Jenna spotted a tall figure in a black trench coat and a half top hat approaching the altar. She instinctively lowered her head and said with a hint of smugness,
"I've discovered almost ten decks of tarot cards from Franca, and she doesn't usually use them for divination."
That fellow... Could it be that she thought it would be cool to toss a Two of Cups on the corpse after taking out a target, so she made preparations? The more Lumian considered it, the more he felt that this was Franca's style.
Jenna paused for a moment and asked, "Does The Fool Pharmaceutical Company also belong to the Church of The Fool?"
"Uh..." Lumian was momentarily caught off guard.
He hadn't given it much thought. Initially, he believed the pharmaceutical company was named after tarot cards.
Now, it appeared that The Fool from the tarot cards seemed to equal Mr. Fool!
Lumian hesitated before responding, "Maybe."
He wasn't entirely certain if The Fool Pharmaceutical Company was affiliated with the Church of The Fool or if it was simply a venture by a member of the Tarot Club.
Jenna demonstrated her keen insight as she inquired, "You brought me here not only because it's a safe place for discussing your faith but also to show that the Church of The Fool is a recognized, mainstream church capable of constructing a cathedral in Trier."
"You're not as naive as you appear," Lumian turned his head and smiled. "My third purpose is to ask if you'd consider converting to Mr. Fool?"
"Convert..." Jenna's mind was in a whirl.
Lumian adopted a persuasive tone, saying, "This doesn't conflict with your contract with the Purifiers. Mr. Fool is an orthodox god acknowledged by all the Churches. However, the propagation of this faith is concentrated on the maritime islands and certain

regions of the Southern Continent. Most people in the Northern Continent are unaware of it."
"But..." Jenna hesitated. "I've never thought about changing my faith..."
Her faith in the Eternal Blazing Sun couldn't be described as devout or fanatical, but it was a habit she had cultivated since childhood. She had also accepted most of the teachings. Until today, the idea of conversion had never crossed her mind. She didn't feel a strong urge to change her faith, nor did she harbor any deep dissatisfaction with the Church.
The only times she'd voiced discontent were during the most challenging years her family endured, especially after her mother's passing. At those moments, she occasionally grumbled about the Eternal Blazing Sun, feeling that He didn't protect true believers. However, these moments were far from sufficient to motivate a conversion.
Lumian glanced at Jenna's face and offered a reassuring smile.
"It's entirely fine if you don't want to convert. I'm merely suggesting it. My main concern is ensuring that if you ever find yourself separated from us during the impending disaster, you know this place is a refuge. Don't worry, even if you're a believer of the Eternal Blazing Sun, Mr. Fool's Church will welcome you and provide protection."
Jenna seemed puzzled and asked, "Then why can't I go to Église Saint-Robert?"
Lumian collected his thoughts and explained, "Franca and I share the same faith and work for a secret organization. Two days ago, we received information from the organization.
"There's a problem with the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Sacred Heart Cloister, similar to the issues with the Deep Valley Cloister of the God of Steam and Machinery Church.
"In such a situation, some cathedrals may not be trustworthy, and you might not be able to distinguish between the reliable and the unreliable. So, it's better to choose those that are known to be reliable."
Jenna had personally experienced the troubles at the Deep Valley Cloister, so she understood the significance of potential problems in the Sacred Heart Cloister.
She murmured to herself, "Could the catastrophe begin from within the Churches?"
"Perhaps," Lumian replied, though he couldn't provide a definitive answer.
At that moment, a towering figure, dressed in a custom-made black trench coat and a half top hat, approached Lumian and

Jenna. He stood at a towering 2.56 meters, with golden hair and eyes.
He looked at Jenna and asked with a warm smile, "Sister, is this your first visit to my lord's cathedral?"
"Yes, but I'm here with a friend," Jenna replied. She instinctively resisted the idea of converting her faith and inquired, "And who are you?"
"I am the bishop here, Teslian," the half-giant introduced himself with a confident smile.
Jenna observed his attire, which looked far from conventional clergy attire.
Teslian turned his gaze to Lumian and continued, "Would you be interested in hearing me introduce our beacon and savior, the great Mr. Fool?
"Don't worry. Our lord doesn't compel people to convert, and he doesn't mind if they believe in him alongside other deities. In turn, believing in him can also coexist with other beliefs."
"You... you can do that?" Jenna stammered.
This was completely beyond her understanding!
Which deity would allow their followers to have impure or multiple beliefs?
Additionally, why refer to this deity as 'him' instead of 'Him'? The latter is the exclusive pronoun for deities! *Why address this deity as 'mister'?*
Jenna's mind was filled with questions, and her thoughts were in disarray.
"Yes, Mr. Fool is known for his compassion and benevolence," the bishop responded, seeing that Jenna and Lumian didn't object. He then opened the black Bible with silver patterns and began to preach.

Chapter 437: Cashing Out

Jenna remained indifferent during the initial part of the sermon, finding it reminiscent of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Holy Bible.

However, her attention perked up when The Fool requested to be addressed as "him" rather than "Him." This slight change in expression indicated her growing focus.

As the sermon continued, Jenna's surprise became evident, and her face revealed a mix of shock and intrigue.

Is Gehrman Sparrow, the adventurer, truly connected to The Fool's Church?

Could he be an angelic messenger delivering The Fool's message of redemption?

Jenna wondered amidst her astonishment. Teslian, the half-giant bishop, didn't press her about her belief in The Fool but instead turned his attention to a supplicant deeply immersed in prayer.

The supplicant appeared to be a sailor in his prime from the sea. His skin was bronze, and his face bore obvious signs of the elements. His hair was disheveled and dark-blue, and Jenna couldn't see his features due to his bowed head in prayer.

Dressed in the same linen shirt, brown jacket, and loose dark pantaloons favored by sailors and pirates, he also sported a unique belt adorned with a dagger, telescope, and various tools.

He's probably a captain. He looks quite dignified... Lumian retracted his gaze and looked at Jenna.

Jenna, still processing the revelations, rose in a daze and left the cathedral. She wandered aimlessly along the harbor district's edge.

Lumian followed, hands in his pockets, refraining from immediate persuasion.

After walking for nearly ten minutes, Jenna slowed down and muttered to herself, "No wonder you claim to be a shallow believer in God."

The God referred to the Eternal Blazing Sun.

Lumian replied with a smirk, "You can also be a shallow believer in Mr. Fool. He doesn't concern himself with such matters."

"I... I'll think about it," Jenna replied, her beliefs shaken by the unconventional sermon. It wasn't that the Bible was well-written; rather, The Fool's claims and the Church of The Fool's approach differed significantly from her previous teachings. She now hesitated and struggled with her faith.

Lumian glanced at her and didn't incessantly persuade her.

In such situations, it was crucial to know when to stop, as excessive attempts could lead to resistance and repulsion.

Almost simultaneously, Lumian sighed inwardly.
As expected, proselytizing needs to be done by professionals...
Given my friendship with Jenna, she didn't hesitate to reject my suggestion to convert. However, the bishop's sermon had stirred something within her, causing her to reconsider her stance...
The two of them continued in silence for another 10 to 20 meters, with Lumian stealing glances at the bustling harbor and the deserted streets nearby. He casually asked, "How's your progress with gathering the Witch potion ingredients?"
Jenna was caught off guard by the question.
"I only digested the Instigator potion two days ago. How could I have gathered the main ingredient for the Witch potion so quickly?"
Perhaps it was the residual influence of the cathedral, but Jenna's urge to curse wasn't as pronounced.
Lumian dropped a bombshell. "Well, I digested the Pyromaniac potion yesterday and managed to acquire both the main ingredient and the supplementary ingredients for the Conspirer potion on the same day."
Jenna couldn't help but exclaim, "Dammit! How can we be the same? I want a special hunting ground for hunting and digestion too!"
Franca had already informed her of Lumian's encounter in Red Swan Castle, excluding Magician's response.
Jenna found it surreal.
Just last night, they were both at Sequence 8 and Sequence 7 respectively, and the gap wasn't that significant. Why did the things they experienced differ so much, as if they were worlds apart?
One of them still dwelled on the fringes of mysticism, occasionally encountering the horrifying bizarre. The other had delved deep into the mysteries, surrounded by secrecy and danger.
After venting her frustration, Jenna disclosed, "I asked the Purifiers, and they don't seem very supportive of my advancement to become a Witch. They won't pay me in advance for the main ingredients. They claimed there's no pressing need for my investigations at the moment. However, they did promise to sell me the main ingredients and the more elusive supplementary ingredients at a discount if I can raise the funds. The main ingredients alone cost 16,000 verl d'or each."
A discounted price... Besides, does this promise mean that the Purifiers have every main ingredient for the Witch potion? I thought they only had converged Beyonder characteristics. After all, their method of obtaining Witch-related items should involve

hunting... Does the Eternal Blazing Sun Church have a way to restore Beyonder characteristics to main ingredients? Lumian didn't quite understand.
Turning his gaze to the road, Lumian pondered and asked, "Do you owe Franca 60,000 verl d'or now?"
"Yes, I do." Jenna fretted at the mention of it. I wonder when I'll be able to pay it back."
Lumian chuckled.
"In that case, would you like to owe a bit more?"
"Huh?" Jenna's thoughts froze.
With his hands still in his pockets, Lumian grinned.
"Owe me 35,000 verl d'or, and I'll help you gather all the ingredients for the Witch potion."
Jenna, intrigued, inquired, "D-do you actually know where to find them?"
Lumian chuckled.
"I'm not entirely certain, but there's a good chance."
He intended to exchange it from the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
Yesterday, he had received recognition from Gardner Martin for his adventure in Red Swan Castle's underground maze, and this contribution could be redeemed immediately or accumulated for higher Sequence potions. Lumian hadn't made up his mind on how to use it yet, but now he decided to utilize it to get all the ingredients for Jenna's Witch potion.
He might need to fork out some money, but disaster could strike at any moment. He might not remain with the Iron and Blood Cross Order in the future. Converting his contribution into a tangible reward made sense.
Moreover, the items gained through such contributions were of lesser value compared to having a willing, living Witch's assistance.
When the time came, with Conspirer Lumian, Demoness of Pleasure Franca, and Witch Jenna working together, they could form a formidable team even among official factions and the Inquisition. Combined with the appropriate mystical items, they could handle most Beyonders below the demigod level. Additionally, they had an unofficial member—Psychiatrist Anthony Reid.
Lumian believed that Gardner Martin likely had the necessary Witch potion ingredients. After all, the Iron and Blood Cross Order primarily followed the Hunter pathway, which was closely related to the Assassin pathway. Over the years, it was improbable that no convergence effect had occurred.
If needed, Lumian could also seek assistance from Mr. K and

Madam Magician.
Jenna fell silent, unable to respond immediately.
Lumian chuckled again.
"It's not a good thing to owe me. In addition to repaying the principal, you have to pay interest, which is helping me with certain tasks. Fortunately, you'll soon have an opportunity to do so."
Jenna pursed her lips and exhaled slowly.
"Alright, I'll give you 10,000 verl d'or first, so I'll only owe you 25,000."
"No problem," Lumian agreed indifferently.
Seeing that Jenna was about to say something, he chuckled and said, "No need to thank me..."
He then lowered his voice and feigned a feminine voice. "We're friends, after all!"
"..." Jenna struggled to find the words. "Dammit!"
Lumian simply chuckled and said nothing.
Jenna, on the other hand, silently followed him across the street toward a few rental carriages parked there.
As they boarded the carriage, Jenna suddenly muttered to herself, "Thank you."
Lumian appeared to be in his own world, occupying a seat in the carriage and disregarding his image.
...
In the afternoon, at 11 Rue des Fontaines.
Lumian spotted Gardner Martin, dressed in a shirt and sweater.
Lumian got straight to the point, saying, "Boss, I wish to exchange my contributions for the Witch potion or all the corresponding ingredients."
Gardner Martin, without displaying any surprise, looked at Lumian with a smile and inquired, "Who is the Witch potion for?"
Lumian replied candidly, "It's for Jenna."
Gardner Martin appeared to be listening and gestured for Lumian to continue.
Lumian said sincerely, "I'm looking for a reliable ally with considerable strength."
At this point, he smiled. "Moreover, I want to experience genuine pleasure."
Gardner Martin burst into laughter.
"Not bad. That's what an ambitious Hunter should aim for.
"No problem. Come by tomorrow morning to collect the Beyonder characteristics and supplementary ingredients. Oh, and make up the difference with another 10,000 verl d'or."
Gardner Martin understood that Lumian and Jenna had a close

relationship with mutual trust. Furthermore, Lumian and Franca's cooperation didn't involve seeking pleasure.
Lumian responded with a smile, "Thank you, Commanding Officer."
After leaving Rue des Fontaines and returning to Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian finally had some free time after a long day of activity.
In the evening, he enjoyed La Fée Verte while listening to Jenna, dressed as Showy Diva, singing passionately to earn money. His mind wandered.
How much can a local singer earn? It's only a few thousand verl d'or a year...
It's still better to fleece the Iron and Blood Cross Order and hunt heretics... When Jenna becomes a Witch, she'll have the strength to participate in battles at this level...
Speaking of which, I didn't think much of it when I read The Adventurer series in the past. Now that I think about it, doesn't Gehrman Sparrow spend most of his time hunting pirates with Beyonder characteristics? How can he become a famous pirate or a great pirate without Beyonder characteristics?
Yes, although the corresponding battles are vague and exaggerated, only highlighting the main points, it's obvious that the author has a certain understanding of Beyonder battles. *Is Madam Fors Wall also a Beyonder?*
Relaxing until nearly midnight, Lumian returned to Auberge du Coq Doré.
As soon as he pushed open Room 207's door, he saw a square of letter on the table under the crimson moonlight.
Madam Magician's letter... Lumian lit the carbide lamp and unfolded the letter.
"Mr. Hanged Man hopes that you and the Two of Cups can summon the Armored Shadow again soon. He'll be responsible for providing the gold.
"Let me know when you've confirmed the time."

Chapter 438: Ghost Ship

Mr. Hanged Man is ready... Lumian took out his golden pocket watch and opened it to take a look.

He could summon the Armored Shadow at any moment. His only concern was that it might pose a danger. Summoning it without a good reason could lead to an attack or a curse. However, with The Hanged Man—the Major Arcana card holder of the Tarot Club—present, there was no need to worry about such matters.

The uncertainty now lay in Franca's availability. After all, she had to translate.

Lumian burned the letter and left Auberge du Coq Doré, heading straight for Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

"Why are you here so late?" Franca clearly wasn't the early-to-bed type.

Lumian glanced at Jenna, who had just finished removing her heavy makeup, and smiled at Franca.

"Do you have time tonight? We can summon the Armored Shadow again and ask it questions."

Summon the Armored Shadow again... Franca's eyes lit up as she blurted out, "I'm free!"

The Armored Shadow was most likely from her homeland, involving the secret of their transmigration and their way back. Even at 6 a.m., she would say she had time to be a translator, let alone just midnight!

Noticing Jenna's confusion and curiosity, Franca explained excitedly, "Didn't Ciel ask us to gather information on spirit world creatures that fulfill the summoning conditions? One of the summoning targets he chose had a directional ambiguity when designing the summoning incantation, attracting a very peculiar spirit world creature. The ability to snort and spit you saw earlier came from a contract with that spirit world creature."

Out of jealousy and envy, Franca described the Spell of Harrumph as snorting and spitting.

Jenna had a deep impression of the Spell of Harrumph and found its effects potent and mystical. Her initial reaction was to ask, "Is it possible for us to sign a contract with similar spirit world creatures?"

"Sigh, I wish I had a similar contracted creature, but I can't obtain such a special contract," Franca expressed her regret and resentment sincerely. "In short, that spirit world creature is very unique and involves many secrets. A big shot of the organization backing us—uh, a demigod—is very interested. And now, only Ciel can accurately summon the target creature through the contract's

connection."
Franca asked Lumian, "Is that person here?"
"Yes." Lumian nodded gently.
Jenna looked at them thoughtfully and asked, "Is it Justice, Magician, or have The Star or The Moon arrived?"
Franca's expression froze, her mouth slightly agape, her eyes filled with disbelief. Lumian was taken aback. He didn't expect Jenna to reveal the code names of the Major Arcana card holders and make the connection that her two companions were related to them.
Amidst the indescribable silence, Jenna's brows relaxed, and she smiled.
"I guessed right! You guys belong to the secret organization that uses tarot cards as their code names!"
"H-how did you know?" Franca asked in surprise.
Jenna pursed her lips and sneered.
"You have nearly ten decks of tarot cards in this room, and you don't usually use them for divination. Then, Ciel told me that the Mr. Fool you believe in is roughly equivalent to The Fool in tarot cards. As for me, I've been attending mysticism gatherings recently and heard about the legend of Justice and the other Major Arcana card holders, as well as the existence of Minor Arcana cards.
"With so much information placed before me, if I don't make any connections and probe, won't I appear stupid?"
The more she spoke, the more pleased she became.
Franca was taken aback for a moment before saying, "Your Instigator potion wasn't wasted..."
"Excellent," Lumian praised reluctantly. "You're prepared to drink the Witch potion."
Without further ado, he left Apartment 601 with Franca. He planned to write a letter to Madam Magician at Auberge du Coq Doré, informing her that he could summon the Armored Shadow now.
Jenna watched them leave and muttered to herself, Witch... What would happen if a man drinks the Witch potion...
...
Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.
After Lumian sent the letter, he didn't extinguish the candle's flame and waited for a reply under the dual illumination.
Franca paced back and forth in the cramped room, feeling excited and a little nervous.
She yearned for clues about returning home via the Armored Shadow, but she feared that even her last hope would be obliterated.
Time ticked by. Just as the Demoness of Pleasure felt as if a year

had passed, the candlelight in the room suddenly surged.
In the dim yellow flames the size of a human head, resplendent starlight flew out, enveloping Lumian and Franca.
It was as if they had arrived in the boundless cosmos, becoming abnormally insignificant.
After a brief moment of dizziness, Lumian and Franca realized that they had left Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré and arrived on a pitch-black deck.
The first thing they saw was an ancient triple mast, its grayish-white sails curled up like an open door.
The crimson moonlight fell from the sky, but it couldn't completely illuminate the area where Lumian and Franca were. It was dark, and the wooden planks were mottled, like an ancient haunted building.
Franca quickly surveyed the area and sighed with relief.
"Wow, an ancient sailboat.
"It's perfect for horror films!"
"What's a horror film?" Lumian asked casually.
Franca smiled awkwardly.
"A play depicting a ghost story."
As she spoke, she touched the dark flaxen rope resting on the shipboard, as if trying to discern its exact era.
Suddenly, the rope came alive and nimbly wrapped around Franca's right hand, attempting to bind the Demoness of Pleasure.
A layer of black flames erupted, scorching the dark linen rope that seemed to possess a life of its own.
The rope snapped back, as if in pain.
Simultaneously, a rope that had been lying silently on the deck swung towards Lumian.
Lumian raised his slightly scorching right palm and grabbed the front of the rope.
The rope suddenly turned still, as if all its vitality had been drained.
All the ropes that had come back to life in this area returned to normal. They landed with a thud and stopped wriggling.
Lumian looked down at his right palm and muttered silently, The Blood Emperor's remnant aura on me faintly resonates with this ship...
These strange ropes became obedient when they felt the heat in my right palm...
Is this the ancient sailboat I saw at Lavigny Docks this morning?
Lavigny Docks... The Fool cathedral... Is this Mr. Hanged Man's ship?
Lumian's thoughts raced as he quickly made a guess.

Franca spun around and said excitedly, "This is a ghost ship, a ghost ship!
"It's alive to begin with!"
As the Demoness of Pleasure's voice reverberated across the deck, Lumian heard Madam Magician's words: "Mr. Hanged Man's ghost ship is a relic from the Tudor Empire. There are many unsolved secrets. When he rewards you, you can choose to explore this ship. As for when to embark on the exploration, it's up to you."
As expected, it has something to do with the Tudor Empire... Lumian's resolve grew as he walked towards the cabin.
As Franca followed, she looked around curiously, touching and tapping here and there. Occasionally, she whispered, as if she wanted to communicate with Mr. Hanged Man's ghost ship.
Amidst the creaking sounds, a door in the cabin opened on its own.
A thick, dark-brown carpet covered the area, flanked by bookshelves and a liquor cabinet. Yellow-covered books and dark-red bottles of wine filled the space.
In front of the bookshelf stood a wide wooden table. On it were a variety of items—an ink bottle, a quill, a brass sextant, a black metallic telescope, and white candles.
Leaning against the desk stood a middle-aged man of average stature. His dark-blue hair was disheveled, and his skin was bronze and rough. He wore a linen shirt, a brown jacket, and loose dark pantaloons. He exuded a dignified aura. He was the supplicant Lumian had seen at The Fool cathedral that morning.
"Are you Mr. Hanged Man?" Lumian inquired.
The man in his prime nodded slightly.
"I'm The Hanged Man."
Franca scrutinized the man and recalled that they were on a ghost ship. She immediately recalled something.
"Y-you're Stormbringer Alger? Is this the Blue Avenger?" Franca blurted out in surprise and delight.
The Hanged Man glanced at her and replied expressionlessly, "You've heard of me?"
"Of course!" Franca praised sincerely. "You're a maritime king without the title of a Pirate King. If you hadn't fought the King of the Five Seas in the Fog Sea and caused the surrounding ships to experience a terrifying storm, no one would have known you were a demigod.
"Furthermore, you're different from those pirates. You're a genuine, unadulterated treasure hunter with lofty aspirations. You never plunder proper ships. You've been exploring the western borders of the Fog Sea, searching for the Lost City of Newins and the Solomon

Empire's inheritance."
It wasn't easy for her to hold back the words "you're my idol." She felt that it would appear to transcend the times. Franca had once dreamed of being a pure treasure hunter and sailing the Five Seas.
Stormbringer Alger... After Lumian discovered that Church of The Fool's power center was at sea, he had consciously shared information about the Pirate Kings and Pirate Admirals with Franca. He knew that Alger, nicknamed Stormbringer, was a demigod captain, but he wasn't a Pirate King. Therefore, his nickname didn't include the term "king." However, Vice Admiral Ailment, who had become a Pirate King, was now known as the Queen of Ailment.
As for the Lost City of Newins and the Solomon Empire's legacy, they were treasure legends that had been popular in the Five Seas for many years.
At times, Lumian couldn't help but admire Fors Wall, the author of The Adventurer series. She had the audacity to write erotic stories about the Pirate Kings.
Aren't you afraid of being found and executed?
Or was she under the protection of the Church of The Fool?
In the face of Franca's enthusiastic praise, The Hanged Man Alger fell silent for two seconds before saying,
"Maintaining a certain level of purity is both a good and a bad thing.
"Can we begin the summoning ritual?"
Franca muttered under her breath, "A man still has a youthful side even in death..."
Lumian responded to Mr. Hanged Man's question, "Anytime."

Chapter 439: Three Questions

With The Hanged Man present, Lumian didn't need to worry about an attack from the Armored Shadow. Instead, he followed a straightforward procedure: creating a protective wall of spirituality and summoning the Armored Shadow as if beckoning a messenger.

Before the candle's dark-green flame, an indistinct shadow silently hovered in midair, adorned in pitch-black armor adorned with golden fish scales.

The contorted faces on the scales twisted ferociously, wordlessly expressing their agony, which had transformed into a deep-seated hatred and malice toward all living beings around them.

The Hanged Man Alger, dressed as a sailor, took a step forward, and subtle silver lightning bolts crackled from the wall of spirituality.

In an instant, they materialized out of thin air, causing Lumian and Franca's skin to prickle.

Amidst the oppressive calm preceding the impending storm, the myriad transparent faces on the Armored Shadow returned to their silence, but their malevolent gazes persisted.

Lumian fixed his gaze on the six radiant gold bars on the altar, steadying himself. In Hermes, he spoke, "I offer a sacrifice. Please answer three questions."

The blurry faces on the Armored Shadow's form shifted their attention to the glowing gold, silently conveying their agreement to Lumian.

Lumian then nodded at The Hanged Man.

After a brief pause, The Hanged Man posed his first question, "Who are you?"

Lumian repeated the query in Hermes. As his contracted creature, the Armored Shadow would only engage in communication under these circumstances.

After a moment of silence, the Armored Shadow spoke in a language that only Franca could barely decipher.

"I am Chen Tu, the God of Ghost Suppression, imperially conferred by the Celestial Master."

Celestial Master... Franca paused, considering her words carefully.

"His last name is Chen and his first name is Tu; he holds the title of the God of Ghost Suppression, which was granted by the leader of Daoism. He is responsible for suppressing evil spirits."

"What is Daoism?" The Hanged Man inquired after some thought.

"What does 'imperially conferred' mean?" Lumian turned to Franca and asked in Intisian.

To him, referring to as an '-ism', regardless of the prefix, seemed no different from the Church of The Fool or the Eternal Blazing Sun Church.
Franca appeared troubled.
"It's a complex topic. We can discuss it later. I'm afraid the Armored Shadow may not have the patience to wait."
That's true... Lumian cast his gaze at Mr. Hanged Man.
The Hanged Man paused briefly before asking the second question, which Lumian translated into Hermes. "What makes the eastern sea so special?"
In a deep and solemn tone, the Armored Shadow replied, "In the East Sea, there's a long-lost immortal mountain known as Penglai."
Penglai... It's really my homeland... Franca was delighted by this revelation. Her translation speed increased as she continued, "On the eastern sea, there's a mountain peak inhabited by various powerful warlocks and unique deities. It has been lost to history, and its name is Penglai."
Both Lumian and The Hanged Man found these words to be straightforward and didn't raise any further questions.
After a brief pause, The Hanged Man Alger asked in a deliberate manner, "Have there been any unusual occurrences in the eastern sea in recent years?"
In recent years? How could the Armored Shadow be aware of recent events when he was suspected to have been killed by the Underworld Daoist, imprisoned by his side, and transported to the Yellow Springs millennia ago? It's a time when the Blood Emperor had just perished or recently perished. Franca quietly mused on this but refrained from correcting The Hanged Man.
Lumian repeated the question, and the Armored Shadow responded with a cold tone, "A corpse from Penglai floated over via the river..."
Franca was taken aback and quickly translated, "The mountain called Penglai has reappeared. A powerful warlock or special deity residing on it has perished, and their corpse drifted to a place that might be the River Styx! It's—it's the river where Blood Emperor Alista Tudor was suppressed by Underworld Daoist. It's the source of the Samaritan Women's Spring!"
Does this mean that the eastern sea of the world where the Armored Shadow resides has undergone an abnormality in recent years? The long-vanished divine mountain, Penglai, has reappeared, and powerful Beyonders residing there have perished? Has the mountain known as Penglai always stood tall in the East Sea, or does it only appear occasionally? Lumian yearned to

inquire further, but he couldn't ask any more questions due to the rules pertaining to summoning.
The six gold bars on the altar disintegrated, turning into sparkling specks of light that merged with the pitch-black fish-scale armor.
This time, nearly one-fifth of the armor plates turned golden and radiant.
The Hanged Man observed as the Armored Shadow faded into the dark-green candle flame. He remained silent, lost in thought, his intentions unclear.
Lumian completed the ritual and swiftly tidied up the altar. Turning to Franca, he said, "You can explain the terms in the first answer."
You're killing me! Franca grumbled silently and pondered for a moment before saying, "An imperial conferment is equivalent to a boon. Yes, a boon!
"This Armored Shadow named Chen Tu was granted a position within the Church or a deity's kingdom. Through this role, he gained the corresponding powers to suppress evil spirits.
"It's not a direct gift from a deity but rather a ceremonial act performed by the leader of that school of thought, acting on behalf of the deity and bestowing a specific title."
Lumian listened attentively and started to grasp the concept of imperial conferment.
This more structured boon system not only linked the power of boons to a specific role but also emphasized the role of the deity's proxy.
Franca exhaled and said, "That's the basic idea. There are many more intricacies if you delve deeper into it. It's a complex topic that can't be fully explained in a short time. Terms like the Heavenly Court, the Netherworld, Ritual Protocols, Receiving Scriptures, and others are related, but I'm not well-versed in all of them. My knowledge is limited to individual terms."
Seeing Mr. Hanged Man and Lumian still staring at her, her heart skipped a beat.
"You really want me to explain all of it?"
The Hanged Man nodded slightly.
"I understand it might be challenging to explain on the spot, and there may be inaccuracies. You can take your time to recollect and organize the information when you return. It might be helpful to put it in writing and convey it to me through your Major Arcana card holder."
"Alright." Franca was relieved that The Hanged Man was understanding and accommodating. He seemed skilled at considering things from another person's perspective. She then

grumbled silently,
Why did I agree so quickly...
The Hanged Man exuded a sense of dignity without arrogance as he smiled and said, "Once you've prepared the written information, you can think about what kind of compensation you'd like."
Franca had several desires, including a mystical item similar to the Spell of Harrumph, a Sealed Artifact that could enable teleportation, and the Sequence 5 Demoness of Affliction potion formula.
She found herself in a dilemma, as she had considered the reward in advance and had almost forgotten to explain the term "Daoism" until Lumian reminded her.
After careful consideration, Franca provided a succinct explanation, "Daoism is a school of thought that venerates the natural laws and the corresponding philosophy that shapes them into unique deities for worship. Their leader is called the Celestial Master, which essentially means a teacher who comprehends the world's operating laws and spreads that knowledge. The 'ways of heaven' refers to the operating laws and corresponding philosophy of the world I mentioned earlier."
Lumian attempted to distill the main point, asking, "So, Celestial Masters are akin to leaders like pontiffs, popes, chief shepherds, and matriarchs, with different titles depending on the denomination?"
Franca hesitated for a moment before confirming, "You could put it that way."
As long as one didn't contemplate joining Daoism, this simplified explanation was sufficient to understand the basic concept.
Lumian nodded.
"It seems like a Celestial Master and an Underworld Daoist are on a similar level."
"I agree," Franca agreed.
During their conversation, The Hanged Man, Alger, rarely interrupted. He mostly listened quietly, occasionally expressing his thoughts or asking questions, which allowed the conversation to flow smoothly. Lumian and Franca shared a lot of information in one go.
Finally, the Major Arcana card holder looked at Lumian and asked, "The Armored Shadow's three answers have been very helpful. What would you like as a reward?"
Very helpful? Apart from allowing us to gain a better understanding of that world and know that the missing Penglai divine mountain has reappeared, there's nothing of practical use...
Lumian kept to Madam Magician's advice and said without

hesitation, "I would like the opportunity to explore this ghost ship."
Franca was surprised by Lumian's request. Her initial shock was quickly replaced by excitement.
I want it too. I want the opportunity to pilot the ghost ship and study it!
The Hanged Man glanced at Lumian and remarked, "As I expected, you've already sensed the uniqueness of the Blue Avenger. It's one of the Tudor Empire's relics. Would you like to explore it now?"
Before Lumian could respond, the deep voice of Termiboros echoed in his mind, "Dangerous."
Danger... For real? Is Termiboros merely concerned about being implicated by me, so He warned me? Or is He afraid that I might gain something special during my exploration of the Blue Avenger, potentially disrupting Trier's potential catastrophe and foiling His scheme? Lumian was momentarily unsure if he should believe Termiboros's words.
Termiboros continued in a deep voice, "If you wish to resurrect Alista Tudor within your body, you can explore it now."
Lumian didn't pay much attention to Termiboros's words. He recalled Madam Magician's prior hint: I can decide when to begin the exploration...
Does this mean I should consider delaying it? Otherwise, why mention it at all? Just request the reward to be a chance of an exploration... Perhaps Aurore's philosophy of balance is at play here. My current negative effects are temporarily balanced, so there's no rush to strengthen the Blood Emperor's aura... As a Conspirer, Lumian quickly made a decision.
"Mr. Hanged Man, I'd like to explore the Blue Avenger at an opportune moment."

Chapter 440: Illusory Sigh

The Hanged Man agreed to Lumian's request and instructed him to contact him through Magician.

After expressing their gratitude, Lumian and Franca left the captain's cabin and followed the creaking wooden planks, just wide enough for three people to walk side by side. In the dim torchlight, they returned to the deck.

They noticed that Alger wasn't alone on the ghost ship, the Blue Avenger. A dozen sailors were scattered around, hiding in the shadows and making no attempts to approach.

Suddenly, Lumian and Franca witnessed a brilliant star hanging in front of them. It gleamed with an eerie, blue light, as though it had emerged from another realm.

The star expanded rapidly, as if it had descended to the ground in an instant. Its radiant glow enveloped everything in its vicinity.

Lumian and Franca blinked, momentarily blinded by the starlight. When their vision cleared, they found themselves back in Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré.

"A-absolutely stunning!" Franca exclaimed, her face brimming with longing.

She lamented the fact that her only option for switching paths was to become a Hunter, unable to experience the carefree life of an Apprentice. She could only hope to acquire a Sealed Artifact with similar abilities in the future.

Lumian, lost in thought, didn't echo Franca's praise.

Observing his contemplative demeanor, Franca couldn't help but voice her concerns, "Don't you find this situation a bit odd?

"Gathering 100,000 verl d'or in gold should be a breeze for a treasure hunter as formidable as a Pirate King. Coming up with those three questions shouldn't take long, yet Mr. Hanged Man only sought you out to summon the Armored Shadow after all these days, and it happened after he arrived in Trier.

"Besides, Madam Magician could easily transport us to the sea and the Blue Avenger before sending us back. So, why wait for Mr. Hanged Man to arrive in Trier to do so?"

Lumian smiled, praising Franca's astute observation.

"You're quite perceptive this time. It seems that putting your brain to work has its benefits. Idleness can give the impression of a lack of intelligence."

"Dammit, are you praising me or insulting me?" Franca retorted, her brow furrowed. "Either Mr. Hanged Man was in some unique situation that prevented an individual from pinpointing his location, or he has other motives for being in Trier..."

At this point, Lumian and Franca both remembered the impending catastrophe and felt the ominous pressure of an approaching storm hanging over the city.
"Could the Tarot Club be dispatching more Major Arcana card holders to Trier? Perhaps to protect as many citizens as possible if we fail to avert the disaster?" Franca speculated.
Lumian nodded thoughtfully, refraining from argument.
After a moment of silence, Franca changed the topic with enthusiasm, exclaiming, "I want to become a demigod. I want to amass gold!"
Observing Lumian's inquisitive expression, Franca continued, driven by her desires, "That way, I can have you summon the Armored Shadow and ask the questions I've been itching to ask. No need to rely on the protection of Major Arcana card holders!"
"Then give it your all, Miss Pleasure," Lumian teased.
...
The next day, just before noon, Lumian returned from Rue des Fontaines. He led Jenna underground to the third level of the catacombs, arriving at a small square with two sacrificial pillars.
Puzzled, Jenna asked, "Why did you bring me here?"
If she didn't know Lumian well enough to understand his character, she might have suspected that her friend suddenly had sinister intentions.
Lumian, wearing a black satchel slung diagonally across him, stood confidently with his hands in his pockets. He smiled and explained, "I'm giving you the safest environment for your advancement."
Having heard Franca's account and Madam Magician's words, Lumian had reason to believe that Sequence 0 of the Assassin pathway, the true goddess worshiped by the Demoness Sect, was likely a woman who had transformed from a man, and Her nature was deeply twisted.
It was said that this Primordial Demoness was driven by pain and a desire to replicate Her experiences through the generations. Consequently, She despised ordinary women who became Witches. Even the Demoness Sect hunted down female Assassins, female Instigators, and true Witches.
Given this context, Jenna's consumption of the Witch potion might be affected. After all, even the Hidden Sage, an existing occupying Sequence 0, could subtly influence every Beyonder of the Mystery Pryer pathway while they consumed the potion for their advancement. He whispered to them and imparted knowledge to them. There was no reason the true evil goddess, Primordial Demoness, couldn't exert significant influence on the Witches.

At lower Sequences, the influence shouldn't be too strong—even Aurore had advanced to Sequence 7 and become a Warlock under the Hidden Sage's constant whispers. However, it was better to be cautious. Since there was a way to reduce or weaken these influences, it made sense to do so.

Witches represented the first qualitative transformation of the Assassin pathway, perhaps even the core essence of Demoness. The Primordial Demoness, who sought to change men into women, would likely pay more attention to this particular Sequence advancement. Neither Franca nor Lumian wanted Jenna to take unnecessary risks.

Of course, Madam Magician had occasionally mentioned that this evil goddess wasn't in a stable state.

"The safest?" Jenna looked around, still somewhat unconvinced.

The surroundings were immersed in darkness, and corpses were scattered about. *How did it seem safe?*

Only the two weathered stone pillars appeared strangely warm and calming.

Lumian briefly explained the unique nature of the sacrificial square and concluded, "At the pinnacle of the Assassin pathway is an evil goddess. No one knows if She might suddenly lose Her sanity. Deities of the same pathway have the ability to influence Beyonders when They consume potions for advancement. This, well, divine manifestation, complicates things."

"This place can significantly weaken that connection."

Jenna listened intently and approached the stone pillar engraved with the Sun Sacred Emblem. She extended her arms slightly and began to pray.

Noticing that she hadn't asked Franca why she hadn't been affected by this before, Lumian raised his right hand, stroked his chin, and clicked his tongue.

"Praise the Sun!" Jenna sang praises to the Eternal Blazing Sun reverently as she concluded her prayer.

Lumian remained silent as he handed Jenna the Witch Beyonder characteristic, Shadow Lizard scales, and other ingredients from the black satchel.

He had used her 10,000 verl d'or to obtain these items from Gardner Martin.

Jenna examined the dark-blue vertical eye-like "jewel" and the intricate thread-like patterns on its surface. She knelt on one knee and began concocting the potion on the unusually clean square ground.

Before long, she held a dark-red potion with concealed shadows in her hand.

Jenna steadied herself, feeling as though she had been pushed forward by various events in the past few months. She couldn't stop now.
Perhaps this is my destiny... Praise the Sun! Jenna closed her eyes and added silently in her heart, Praise The Fool!
At this critical moment, in her quest for smooth advancement and survival, her faith inadvertently shifted.
This was partly because Franca and Lumian seemed relatively relaxed about consuming potions and advancing their Sequences. At the very least, they both believed in Mr. Fool.
Without hesitation, Jenna swallowed the potion, fully accepting the notion that she had been dead when she assassinated Hugues Artois.
The potion was icy and illusory, like melting frost. Jenna quickly began to feel an itching, painful sensation spreading all over her body.
Her thoughts began to blur, and she felt as though she were slowly sinking into water.
Suddenly, excruciating pain surged throughout her body, jolting Jenna back to full awareness. She found herself surrounded by black, silent flames that were slowly consuming her.
Above her, a translucent layer of frost-encased ice, like a mirror, prevented Jenna from escaping the black flames.
In the next instant, a face and a figure materialized on the ice.
The face bore an uncanny resemblance to Jenna's own!
The figure was another Jenna, but her master hand had transformed into her left!
The Jenna above the ice stared at the figure engulfed by the black flames with anticipation and desire.
Experienced in combat, Jenna reacted quickly despite her surprise and horror. She summoned all her strength and delivered a powerful punch upward.
The ice shattered without a sound, and the "corrupted" Jenna plunged into the black flames.
In the distance, a python-like black object swayed gently, with a dark-blue vertical eye at its tip.
The bizarre "python" vanished in an instant, not entering the area. Instead, it delved into a black shadow.
Almost simultaneously, Jenna heard a long, painful sigh.
The ethereal sigh seemed to emanate from very close to her, as if it originated from the vicinity of the sacrificial square and the surrounding corpses.
The black shadow cast by the strange serpent expanded wildly, growing larger and fainter.

It enveloped Jenna and the malevolent figure and seeped into their bodies.
Jenna refused to surrender. Enduring the pain and dizziness, she crawled out of the abyss of black flames and onto the nearby ice. The black shadow weakened and ceased its pursuit. It could only drag the malevolent Jenna into an unfathomable abyss.
The scene shattered instantly, and Jenna's vision returned to normal. She saw the mottled stone pillar engraved with the Sun Sacred Emblem.
Her face contorted, but the pain in her body gradually subsided.
Lumian watched as the black flames on Jenna's body rapidly shrank and dissipated, while the surrounding frost melted. He understood that his companion had successfully advanced to Sequence 7 and had become a Witch.
Only then did he turn his gaze towards the edge of the sacrificial square, where the tomb and the surrounding corpses lay in darkness.
Not long after Jenna consumed the potion, he sensed an anomaly in that direction. However, nothing entered the clean square with the two sacrificial pillars.
When Jenna's unusual state finally subsided, she rose to her feet and noticed Lumian gazing into the distance. Puzzled, she asked, "After drinking the potion, I thought I heard a sigh from over there."
Lumian nodded slowly and replied, "On this level of the catacombs, there's a Krismona Night Pillar. It represents a Demoness of Catastrophe who once met her end here."

Chapter 441: Demoness Cooperation

"Demoness of Catastrophe..." Jenna had never heard of this term from Franca. "Is it a Sequence name?"

Lumian didn't hold anything back.

"Yes, a Sequence 2 angel. Heh heh, the term angel and Demoness always seem strange together."

Angel... Jenna didn't have a clear impression of individuals at this level.

Though she had often heard Lumian and Franca talk about the terror and might of demigods, it had remained theoretical for her. She didn't know how terrifying or powerful they were.

Jenna muttered to herself, "Krismona... Hasn't She already perished? Why am I still hearing Her sigh? It should be from Her, right?"

Lumian looked at Jenna and said solemnly, "For such a formidable figure, even if They were to perish completely, there would still be remnants of Their mind that wouldn't dissipate. It's like not stiffening even after becoming a corpse.

"In the future, if you come into contact with the inheritance of a similar influential figure, you must be very, very careful."

Jenna looked surprised and vigilant. She glanced at the edge of the sacrificial square and asked with concern, "What do we do now?"

Lumian chuckled.

"What can we do? What else but wait for Her to sigh? Do you have thoughts of comforting Her?

"Don't worry. She's imprisoned by death and bound by the spring water. She can't leave the fourth and third levels of the catacombs. As long as you don't explore this place, you don't have to worry about anything.

"How was it? Was there any influence from the Primordial Demoness?"

It was only then that Lumian, holding the white candle, assessed Jenna's appearance.

Her skin, which hadn't been particularly good due to her background and experiences, seemed to have been reborn. Her facial features looked the same as usual, but the details had become more exquisite, as if there was a luster flowing through them. Overall, she exuded an alluring charm and became even more feminine.

Even with Lumian's experience, he couldn't help but marvel inwardly.

Jenna was also scrutinizing herself. She felt that her height had increased a little, and the ratio of her body parts she had

previously been dissatisfied with had approached perfection.
"I sensed a peculiar python appear, but it didn't really approach me. It quickly vanished..." Jenna recalled as she took out a prepared mirror. Facing the yellow candle flame in Lumian's hand, she scrutinized her reflection and couldn't help but smile.
It was common for most people to appreciate beauty, and Jenna was no exception. Seeing how beautiful and charming she had become made her quite happy. She even felt enchanted by herself.
Reluctantly, she put away the mirror and assessed her changes from various angles.
I can now use black flames that incinerate the Spirit Body and spirituality. I've gained the blessing of frost. I've mastered various forms of black magic. With prepared ingredients, I can directly become invisible and cast rare spells. Additionally, I can curse targets through blood and other media. I've unlocked the door to Mirror magic and now possess anti-divination and the ability to create substitutes. I am skilled in using staff and can also use them as substitutes...
Compared to Assassins and Instigators, Witches had undergone a qualitative transformation. They possessed comprehensive abilities, considerable strength, and excelled in survival. Only then did Jenna truly feel like a member of the world of mysticism and a controller of superpowers.
She suddenly felt an urge to test a Witch's various abilities on a target.
However, after glancing at Lumian, she abandoned the idea.
She felt that there was still a significant gap between them. Even a Sequence 6 Franca likely wasn't Ciel's match. Of course, if Franca truly intended to assassinate Lumian, her chances of eliminating him weren't slim. Most Beyonders below Sequence 4 were relatively weak. If they committed an error, it could very well plunge them into the depths of hell.
Lumian tossed a burning white candle to Jenna and pointed at his black satchel.
"There's some cosmetics in here. Make yourself look less attractive to hide your striking charm. That way, the Demoness Sect's hidden members won't recognize you as a Witch at a glance."
For this purpose, he had brought a set of women's cosmetics.
Jenna clicked her tongue.
"You even thought of such details in advance..."
"In the Beyonder world, being cautious and meticulous effectively increases your chances of survival," Lumian said, turning around. "Let's disguise ourselves elsewhere. It's not suitable to stay here for too long."

"Why do I get the feeling that you're often impulsive and a little crazy..." Jenna muttered softly before smiling. "Do you also think I've become more beautiful now?"
She wasn't wearing any makeup, but her blue eyes seemed to contain starlight as they darted around.
Lumian scoffed.
"I respect the potion's effects and believe in the influence of Beyonder characteristics."
With that, he turned around, holding the candle, and walked towards the wide stone steps leading up.
You sure never lose out in a battle of tongues! Jenna cursed under her breath, quickly packed her things, and followed him.
Before she could figure out how to continue teasing Lumian and express her gratitude, she heard the man slowly walk forward and casually say, "Also, you have to work for me tomorrow."
"Dammit!" Jenna blurted out.
...
In the library district, Rue des Terraces.
The street was known for its diverse terraces, frequented by tourists.
Lumian stood on a café terrace decorated in shades of green and white, casting a sidelong glance at Building 20, where Guillaume Bénet's widow, Condiment Beauty Paulina, resided.
The terrace of the house was painted a refreshing white, supported by a wooden frame that shielded it from the wind and rain. It resembled a resort hotel on the southern coast of Intis.
Lumian sipped his coffee as all the information and conjectures he had gathered during this period flashed through his mind.
Every week, a mysterious man visits the Condiment Beauty at night. Once or twice a week... At least once this week. It should be within these two days...
According to the observations of the surrounding citizens, there are a total of three mysterious men who visited Paulina at night. One is young, one is in his prime, and one is nearly 60 years old...
Who among them could be the Sinners' liaison, Bouvard Pont-Péro?
One of Bouvard's contracted abilities is Transfiguration. These three might or might not be him. They're just substitutes he creates to attract attention, and he sneaks in disguised as one of Paulina's servants...
The price of Transfiguration is one's own face. The downside is the desire to abuse others... The buildings on Rue de la Terrasse are quite soundproof. None of the neighbors heard Paulina's screams...
Some time has elapsed since Guillaume Bénet's demise. It's highly

likely that Paulina officially joined the Sinners organization, received a boon, and became a Beyonder...
The most important part of the plan is to determine who Bouvard Pont-Péro is...
Lumian had a plan. As the sky darkened, he finished his coffee and donned his brown round hat. Without making a sound, he left the building and vanished into an alley on the side of the street.
...
20 Rue de la Terrasse, in the spacious and warm master bedroom.
The mature and beautiful Paulina, adorned in a pale-white nightgown, walked to the full-body mirror, removed her clothes, and examined the whip-like marks on her body.
They had faded to a faint dark-red hue, likely to dissipate completely within a few days.
Paulina let out a soft sigh at the thought of the pain she would have to endure for the next two days.
Her gaze fell upon the black mark on her right shoulder, and she rejoiced that the first contract ability she had chosen after becoming a Contractee was Regeneration.
Once activated, it could regenerate flesh and skin to a certain extent, allowing various injuries to quickly recover.
Paulina had never tested whether this could regenerate limbs, believing it should work if the conditions were met.
Of course, the dead couldn't activate their abilities.
Paulina adjusted her light-white nightgown and prepared to put on light makeup to welcome a potential guest.
At that moment, she suddenly felt a strong sense of danger.
This also stemmed from her contract ability. She felt that sensing danger was more important than actual combat.
For this, she had paid the price of "fertility" and received the negative effect of mild mental weakness.
Paulina's nerves tightened, and her body abruptly bent backward. With the flexibility of a Dancer, she distanced herself from the source of danger.
Simultaneously, she opened her right palm, and silver-white lightning shot out, intertwining with a crackling sound, enveloping the area where she suspected the assailant was hiding.
This was her third and final contracted ability, Electric Arc. It could effectively compensate for her weaknesses in offensive means. The price was that she was prone to lightning strikes in a thunderstorm. The downside was that her body had become more sensitive. She could originally withstand 70-80% of her original threshold for pain. This made Paulina resistant to Bouvard Pont-Péro's visit. She relied on Alms Monk's endurance to hold on every

time.
With a cracking sound, a mirror suddenly appeared in the area covered by the lightning in her palm. It quickly charred and shattered into pieces.
From the corner of her eye, Paulina spotted a figure swiftly outlined by the drawn curtains. She hurriedly contorted her body to avoid it.
Suddenly, a white fist materialized behind her head and smashed below her ear.
With a bang, Paulina blacked out.
Behind Condiment Beauty, Jenna, dressed as a female mercenary, instantly appeared.
She and Franca easily controlled their target with dual invisibility, anti-divination tactics, one to attract attention, and the other to launch a sneak attack.
Franca took a few steps forward, retrieved the Bliss Society's sedative, and brought it to Paulina's nose.
After completing her task, Jenna drew the curtains to leave a slight crack, casting her outstretched palm in the light of the room.
This was a signal to Lumian that the operation had succeeded.
Before long, Lumian scaled the outer wall and entered the master bedroom with Jenna's help.
Then, he tossed the Lie earring to Franca.
Franca transformed the mystical item into a silver pendant and hung it on her chest.
Her appearance and height changed, becoming more and more like Paulina.

Chapter 442: Opportunity to Act

Seeing Franca appear before her as Paulina, Jenna couldn't help but marvel at the wonders of the Lie accessory.

This transformation was countless times more potent than that of an Actor of the Mother Tree of Desire pathway. It was the most mystical disguise she had ever encountered.

Franca gazed at her reflection in the full-body mirror and stroked her face gently. She chuckled and said, "I like this style too."

"What don't you like?" Lumian mocked.

"This is called having an eye for beauty!" Franca opened Paulina's wardrobe and chose a pair of pajamas that could hide many items. She entered the master bedroom's washroom and began changing.

Soon, "Madame Paulina" emerged. Jenna knew Franca well, but she temporarily couldn't tell the authenticity.

After Franca entered Invisibility, Lumian administered some truth serum to the unconscious Paulina.

He estimated the time and felt that it was about time. Then, he took out the Mysticism Smelling Salts and brought them to Paulina's nose.

Amidst the sneezes, Lumian capped the bottle and retreated into a crevice beside the wardrobe, preventing Paulina, who had regained consciousness, from seeing him.

Jenna retrieved a small revolver from her dark brown belt, squatted down, and pressed it against Paulina's forehead, ready to pull the trigger.

Paulina snapped out of her daze and saw a face adorned with a silvery-white half-mask.

The face was uncovered, and although the skin wasn't fair and had some flaws, and the texture was concealed by cosmetics, the curves were quite beautiful, making people of the same sex take a second look.

Immediately after, Paulina felt the coldness of the gun's barrel and saw a revolver held to her head.

Her body tensed instinctively.

Jenna didn't give her a chance to express her doubts or pleas. She asked bluntly,

"When will Bouvard Pont-Péro arrive?"

Paulina replied subconsciously, "In the next two days..."

Before she could finish, she suddenly shut her mouth, disbelief etched on her face.

W-why did I say what was on my mind?

Jenna raised a second question based on her preparations.

"In the past two months, among the mysterious men who visited

you under the cover of night, who was Bouvard Pont-Péro? Or were all of them him?"
Paulina struggled for a few seconds before blurting out, "No, it's Bouvard only once a week. The rest are just his attempts to confuse others. Moreover, he changes his appearance every two or three times. He—he has Transfiguration."
Jenna asked curiously, "Will the others Bouvard Pont-Péro send sleep with you?"
Did they keep up the act to the very end, or did they only keep up appearances for the latter half?
"No," Paulina replied, swallowing her saliva. "Bouvard possesses a strong sense of possessiveness. Since I've already become his lover, he won't allow me to have any more intercourse with other men. The people he sends will only chat with me, have dinner with me, and wander around the bedroom for a while before leaving."
Very possessive... Lumian's thoughts raced as he listened in the shadows, recalling the mysticism knowledge he had obtained when he became a Contractee.
Soon, he found a contracted creature that fit the criteria and its corresponding abilities.
Evil Shadow Black Beast, a spirit world creature that resides in the shadows of creatures. The birth of its descendants requires the stripping of a shadow as a carrier. Creatures that lose their shadows will die on the spot...
By sacrificing a human's shadow, he could obtain the Shadow Substitution ability from the Evil Shadow Black Beast, and his possessiveness would significantly increase...
By controlling the target or subduing them in advance, he could complete Shadow Substitution in battle and use someone else's shadow to take damage on his behalf, avoiding dangerous attacks. Under such circumstances, the distance between the main body and the target couldn't exceed 20 meters...
"I wonder how much those actors earn..." Jenna teased with a smile before asking, "What Sequence Beyonder is Bouvard Pont-Péro equivalent to. What contractual abilities does he possess?"
Paulina pursed her lips, unwilling to answer.
After a few seconds, she couldn't resist the urge to spill the beans. She opened her mouth and said, "Bouvard is an Ascetic. He said that a Fate Appropriator is the most important Sequence of the Inevitability pathway before obtaining godhood. One needs to make significant contributions to obtain the corresponding boon. He's still far from that.
"He once mentioned that Ascetic can have six contractual abilities, but I don't know if that refers to ordinary circumstances or special

circumstances."
Leaning against the wardrobe, Lumian couldn't help but chuckle inwardly.
Temiboros, are you aware of this?
He didn't ask because he knew Termiboros wouldn't answer such a question.
Paulina continued, "He didn't display all his abilities in front of me. He always wore pajamas and didn't expose his upper body during sex.
"I've seen him emerge from the shadows and know he has three imps. He even suggested I choose the Danger Premonition ability, believing it to be useful."
Shadow Burial, Tamed Imps, Danger Premonition, Shadow Substitution, Transfiguration... That's a total of five contracted abilities... If Bouvard Pont-Péro is nothing special, there should be only one unknown contracted ability. Even if he's stronger than ordinary Ascetics, there's a high chance that his total abilities won't exceed eight... Lumian quickly formed a clearer understanding.
The price of Shadow Burial was having normal dreams. The downside was becoming more extreme and paranoid. The price of Tamed Imps was three infant corpses that had died before they were born. The downside was that he had to use his life force to feed the imps, and there was a risk of backlash. The specific method was to grow sarcomas that looked like breastfeeding. Danger Premonition involved sacrificing fertility and become mentally weak...
Contractee abilities are truly peculiar... Ever since becoming a Witch and becoming deeply involved in the Sinners organization, Jenna had learned about Contractee, Alms Monk, Ascetic, and other Inevitability Sequences. She now knew why Lumian possessed Spell of Harrumph, Spirit World Traversal, and other abilities.
She thought for a moment and asked, "Apart from contractual abilities, does Bouvard Pont-Péro possess any mystical items, Beyonder weapons, or other items?"
Paulina shuddered inexplicably.
"H-he has two pockets that I can't touch. He always chooses the kind of pajamas with pockets or pants pockets."
Carries some items... I wonder what powers they possess... But at least we won't end up empty-handed... Lumian allowed his thoughts to wander.
Jenna followed the predetermined rhythm of their conversation and inquired about Paulina's performances in front of Bouvard

Pont-Péro, her interactions with the butler and servants in the building, her abilities, and her assets.
It wasn't until Lumian tossed the sedative from the Bliss Society that Jenna stopped asking and caught it with her freed left hand.
Then, Paulina fainted again.
"She possesses Regeneration, much like a Vampire's self-healing ability. The sedative's effects will likely be diminished and won't endure for long," Jenna inquired. "Why didn't you simply eliminate her?"
Lumian cast a glance at the new Witch and let out a chuckle.
"You're quite the ruthless one, aren't you?"
Jenna pursed her lips and stated, "Showing kindness to heretics only harms innocent citizens."
"Exactly!" Franca, disguised as Paulina, deactivated her Invisibility and concurred.
The more she observed Witch Jenna, the more she found herself liking her. Despite Jenna deliberately donning unattractive makeup and a half-mask, Franca had a discerning eye for beauty.
Lumian scoffed and said, "Haven't you heard that Bouvard Pont-Péro seems to possess Danger Premonition? Even though you can counter divination, if Paulina were to die now and her boon's power returns to its source, do you think Bouvard won't receive a warning from fate?
"Anthony still has time to enter. He won't engage in direct combat, but he'll serve a purpose in my scheme."
Lumian not only aimed to capture Bouvard Pont-Péro but also intended to act as a Conspirer in this endeavor.
"I understand," Franca said with widened eyes. "I just adhere to the notion of being ruthless toward heretics."
As she spoke, she removed the Lie silver pendant from her chest and tossed it to Jenna. Lumian instructed Anthony Reid to infiltrate the building via the outer wall of the master bedroom.
...
As the drizzle descended into night, the gas street lamps on both sides of the street emitted a hazy glow.
At 20 Rue de la Terrasse, a man in a silk top hat, black suit, and dark bow tie rang the doorbell.
He had an ordinary appearance, short, thick eyebrows, and deep blue eyes. He wouldn't attract anyone's attention when he walked along the bustling arcade.
The butler of the house opened the door. He glanced at the visitor and discreetly gestured.
The man formed a circle with his hands and asked, "Where's Paulina?"

"Madame awaits you in the bedroom," the butler replied respectfully.
The man nodded and made his way through the living room and up the stairs, arriving outside the master bedroom.
Without knocking, he turned the handle and entered.
In the spacious and warm master bedroom, the wall lamps had all been extinguished. The candlelight flickered dimly, casting a soft, rosy glow that quickened one's pulse.
The man's eyes fixed on Paulina, reclining on the bed, and a grin crept across his face.
"Why does it feel even more enticing than before?"
"Something special just for you," Paulina whispered.
The man stared at the alluring contours, his pulse racing. He chuckled and said,
"Why do I find you more captivating than ever?"
"I dressed up just for you." Paulina, in her two-piece pajamas, seemed bashful, her cheeks flushed as she closed her eyes.
The man swallowed hard, his mind on high alert, though his body couldn't resist taking a step forward.

Chapter 443: Trap Within A Trap

The man suspected to be Bouvard Pont-Péro took a step forward and finally regained some rationality.

He adjusted the dark bow tie beneath his neck, and three indistinct figures materialized above his head and shoulders.

These figures weren't large; they looked like newborns with pale-white, bluish skin and sinister expressions on their round, distorted faces.

Tamed Imps!

The three translucent and indistinct imps burrowed toward Bouvard Pont-Péro's chest, each finding its place and began suckling in a frenzied manner.

Suddenly, their figures became much clearer. They left his body, circling around and flying at an extremely fast speed to different parts of 20 Rue de la Terrasse.

With no corporeal form, they effortlessly traversed walls and doors. In a short span of time, they went through the master bedroom's wardrobe, desk, changing room, and washroom, leaving no room for any assailant to hide.

One sinister-looking imp with a bluish-white face even circled the room's shadows, ensuring that no Beyonder could rely on supernatural powers to lurk in this special environment.

Seeing Paulina's puzzled and watery gaze as she opened her eyes, Bouvard Pont-Péro subconsciously explained, "My Danger Premonition tells me that something is amiss here. Lately, I need to be extremely cautious and avoid making any mistakes. After I eliminate the hidden danger and confirm my safety, I'll enjoy my evening with you."

For some inexplicable reason, Bouvard's tone was gentler and more eager to explain than before when facing Paulina. It was as if her attire and demeanor tonight had touched his heart, making him irresistibly attracted and eager to please her.

As Bouvard Pont-Péro finished speaking, one of the imps left the master bedroom and entered the adjacent room.

With its bluish-white skin, it reached the end of the corridor, passed through the wardrobe, and entered.

In the next moment, it saw a figure bound and gagged.

The figure wore a pale-white nightgown, and her clothes were disheveled, revealing a large area of her skin. She was beautiful, elegant, and had a plump body like a ripe fruit. She was another Paulina!

The contorted-faced imp let out a shrill cry and rushed back into Bouvard Pont-Péro's embrace. As it drew closer to his chest,

sucking, it relayed the scene it had witnessed to its feeder.
Bouvard Pont-Péro's expression changed, realizing he had fallen into a trap and been ambushed.
Luckily, he had been cautious enough to detect hidden dangers in advance!
The Sinners' liaison darkened and merged with his shadow, sliding into the wall's shadows like a snake.
His Shadow Burial's ability was unlike that of many Beyonders. They relied on the dimness of shadows to hide, while he transformed himself into a shadow, truly becoming part of the darkness. Just like the special creatures that inhabited such environments, he could stray into alternate spaces connected to certain shadowy regions.
At that moment, Bouvard Pont-Péro felt as if he had plunged into a lightless sea. His body extended and merged with the inky droplets.
Quickly, he darted towards the room at the end of the corridor.
His mission: to save Paulina and escape Rue de la Terrasse with her.
He harbored an extraordinary possessiveness for this Condiment Beauty.
As Bouvard moved through the shadows, he suddenly heard a crisp crack.
The yellow gas wall lamp blazed to life, filling every inch of the glass cover with flames.
The gas lamps in the corridor transformed into miniature suns, banishing the shadows.
Only a serpentine humanoid shadow remained on the floor.
Jenna, who had transformed into the lady's maid using Lie, emerged from a side room, casting a black flame onto Bouvard Pont-Péro's shadow.
The Sinners' liaison immediately felt pain and weakness originating from the depths of his soul.
Without hesitation, he used Shadow Substitution.
In 20 Rue de la Terrasse, Paulina's butler and servants had already become believers in Inevitability. They submitted to the envoy, Bouvard Pont-Péro, and their shadows were offered for exchange!
In Paulina's lady's maid's room, the human shadow suddenly squirmed and transformed.
The black shadow stood up, becoming plumper, resembling Bouvard Pont-Péro.
The shadows in the corridor quickly dissipated under the black flames. The lady's maid in the room twitched a few times, and black flames oozed from her nostrils, ears, mouth, and eyes. Then,

she fell silent and ceased breathing.
Bouvard Pont-Péro seized the moment when Shadow Substitution took effect to activate another contracted ability.
He sprinted forward, leaving behind dozens, even hundreds of phantoms.
His body flickered amidst the phantoms, shifting positions so that Jenna couldn't lock onto him or distinguish him.
In the blink of an eye, Bouvard Pont-Péro, accompanied by a group of figures, entered the room where Paulina was bound and opened the corresponding wardrobe.
Paulina's eyes were filled with surprise, desire, and hope as she watched Bouvard's right hand, gleaming with a metallic luster, become incredibly sharp.
In an instant, the Sinners' liaison severed the rope and attempted to escape the encirclement with Paulina.
He had a total of eight contracted abilities, one of which had never been used before.
At that moment, as the rope loosened, Paulina couldn't help but remember her traumatic experiences of abuse at the hands of Bouvard, the pain etched into the depths of her mind.
Uncontrollable hatred surged in her heart. She longed for the one who had harmed her to face justice.
She suddenly raised her right hand.
Alarm bells rang in Bouvard's mind as he sensed an intense Danger Premonition.
Yet, at this distance, no one could react faster than Electric Arc.
Silver-white lightning shot from Paulina's palm and struck Bouvard's body. His body went numb, and even his thoughts seemed to be engulfed by lightning, temporarily rendering him powerless.
Franca, disguised as Paulina, had already closed within five meters, aiming the Ring of Punishment she wore.
Lightning flickered in her eyes, and Bouvard's body shuddered, as if his soul was being torn apart, in excruciating pain that left him unable to think straight.
Psychic Piercing!
Smack!
Jenna, who had dashed to her target's side, clenched her fist and struck behind Bouvard's ear before he could rely on his Ascetic endurance to recover.
The Sinners' liaison slipped into unconsciousness.
Before Bouvard lost consciousness, he glimpsed a pair of black leather shoes and heard a taunting voice.
"I don't even need to lift a finger when dealing with you."

...
Bouvard abruptly broke free from the darkness and regained consciousness.
The first thing he saw was a right leg resting on his left knee and that pair of black leather shoes. Then, he saw a young man leaning back in an armchair, his hands pressing on the armrests.
Bouvard instinctively wanted to use his abilities, but all his thoughts seemed to sink into a quagmire, unresponsive.
In the next moment, he noticed that his feet had transformed into cow hooves, and he was wrapped in a layer of brown cowhide.
Animal Creation Spell... Bouvard instantly grasped his predicament. He watched as the young man with golden and black hair leisurely flipped through the grayish-blue cloth bag he had hidden in his pocket.
Wh— Bouvard instinctively held his breath, hoping that the other party would take out the item.
Soon, the young man retrieved a gold coin with a 5 verl d'or denomination with a Sunbird relief from a grayish-blue cloth bag.
Yes! That's it! Bouvard anticipated what would happen next.
Simultaneously, he focused on observing the other party's luck.
This was one of the few abilities not restricted by the Animal Creation Spell.
Bouvard's bullish face now donning an honest look, suddenly froze.
He saw his enemy's luck of all kinds, and he saw layers of colors constantly changing!
A sharp pain pierced Bouvard's brain, and he instinctively closed his eyes. He felt a sticky, warm, and bloody liquid slowly trickle down from his eyeballs.
As Bouvard's pain subsided, as if he had seen something he shouldn't have, he heard the young man say with a smile, "Were you hoping that I'll take away this gold coin of misfortune and have my luck changed passively, allowing you to escape your predicament?"
He knows the Luck Transference Spell... He also knows the Animal Creation Spell... Does he belong to another organization that believes in Inevitability or... A name suddenly flashed through Bouvard Pont-Péro's mind: Lumian Lee?
Lumian seemed to sense Bouvard's thoughts and smiled without humor.
"I thought you were always on guard against me."
Bouvard's heart sank, and he abandoned any hope of luck. He immediately used his spirituality to stir the air within the cowhide and indistinctly recited the honorific name of the individual.

However, he quickly realized that his spirituality was on the verge of drying up, and his mind was extremely weak. He couldn't even do such a thing.
"If you understand your situation, you can answer my questions," Lumian said with a smile.
Bouvard subconsciously opened his mouth and mooed.
He had an urge to communicate with the other party, but he could only let out a cow's moo.
Jenna, dressed as a female mercenary, brought over a brass mechanical typewriter and placed it in front of Bouvard.
This was Franca's suggestion: There was no need to worry that Bouvard Pont-Péro wouldn't be able to answer questions after being transformed into a bull by the Animal Creation Spell. As long as he wasn't illiterate and had a certain level of intelligence, he could compose answers by typing on the keyboard. The only drawback was that his speed wouldn't be too fast.
Seeing the calf sit down on its hind legs and place its front hooves on the mechanical typewriter's button with difficulty, Franca, who was invisible and could stop the other party from doing any irrational act at any moment, muttered silently, Now, no one can tell if the person typing at the keyboard is human or bull...
Lumian glanced at Bouvard and asked bluntly, "Where are the Sansons?"

Chapter 444: The Sinners´ Leader

The brown male calf's front hooves delicately tapped the mismatch-sized mechanical typewriter, careful not to press any keys accidentally.

Lumian toyed with the gold coin of misfortune, patiently awaiting Bouvard's full response.

Seizing the opportunity, he swiftly reviewed the operation in his mind.

From the start, he had no intention of acting personally. First, he wanted to try playing the role of a Conspirer. Second, he aimed to improve the performance and teamwork of the small team members.

Considering Bouvard Pont-Péro's possessiveness, Lumian shifted his attention to Paulina. Through Anthony Reid's repeated Psychological Cues, the woman's accumulated resentment from the abuse had fermented, turning into a seed that would sprout once her restraints were removed.

To make Bouvard lower his guard, allowing his Danger Premonition to only trigger at the end, Lumian not only made Franca prepare against divination but also had his companion masquerade as Paulina, making the target believe subconsciously that the one tied up was the real Paulina.

Of course, she was the real deal. Before Bouvard cut the rope, Paulina didn't hold any true grudge against him. Her sincere desire was to be rescued, an emotion that couldn't be feigned. It was enough to convince Bouvard without setting off his Danger Premonition.

Jenna's role was to launch an attack and provide suppression, preventing the target from observing the environment or contemplating details. This forced him to approach Paulina and escape from 20 Rue de la Terrasse with his precious belongings as quickly as possible. Additionally, they wanted the enemy to instinctively believe that the ambush centered around the master bedroom. The room where the actual Paulina was held was, therefore, relatively secure.

As Lumian had foreseen, Bouvard "sprinted" right into the trap.

Without focusing the conspiracy on Paulina, with Bouvard's Danger Premonition, regardless of how convincing Franca's performance was or how similar she looked to Paulina, he would have sensed it in advance and sent his imps to confirm it cautiously.

From this act, traps are the simplest and most direct conspiracy, while conspiracies are the deepening and escalation of traps...

Lumian sensed the potion's minute digestion and sighed inwardly.
Simultaneously, in her invisible state, Franca sensed no impending or brewing danger as Bouvard's hooves struck the keys. She gradually relaxed.
She couldn't help but recall her conversation with the Sinners organization's liaison while impersonating Paulina. Her face flushed red, and she felt intense embarrassment.
How embarrassing! How f*cking embarrassing!
Finally, Bouvard completed his initial keyboard conversation.
Jenna ripped the paper filled with words from the mechanical typewriter and swiftly read it to Lumian and Franca.
"More than two months ago, the Sansons went somewhere and haven't returned yet.
"I don't know where that is. From what they said, it's related to something important.
"Before this, Constace, the mistress of the Sansons, had already gone mad. To prevent her from taking drastic actions when out of control and attracting the attention of official Beyonders and affecting the other members of the organization, her husband, Voisin Sanson, along with their child, killed her and allowed her to return to the Lord's kingdom."
Purged due to madness? *When did you get the impression that you weren't mad?* However, the extent of your madness isn't serious. You're at a stage where your perspectives are distorted and abnormal. You even know how to disguise yourself... Lumian muttered silently after hearing that.
From his perspective, ever since establishing a connection with the entity known as Inevitability, those believers were no longer ordinary people. They had more or less been corrupted and had potential mental problems. At some point in time, they might completely lose their minds or collapse.
If Lumian didn't possess Mr. Fool's seal and had the Beyonder characteristics balancing things out, he would have been crazier and more terrifying than Constace, whom Bouvard had mentioned.
Jenna, who stood between him and Bouvard, couldn't help but hiss. She felt that it was a good thing to be ruthless to heretics.
Those people had lost their normal emotions. They killed their wife or mother without hesitation!
If they could even do this to their loved ones, one could imagine how they would treat the people around them!
"Who were the ones who went to the unknown place you mentioned?" Lumian inquired.
Tap! Tap! Tap! The calf began typing on the keyboard again.

This time, it was much more proficient than before. Its answers appeared character by character on the paper.
"Voisin Sanson is our leader. He received a revelation and led a few Fate Appropriators in Trier to that place."
"Voisin Sanson is the leader of the Sinners organization?" Lumian asked in surprise.
According to I Know Someone, didn't Voisin Sanson choose to join the Sinners organization because he was on the verge of bankruptcy and later successfully changed his luck and obtained the power of boons?
Tap! Tap! Tap! A new answer was printed on the paper and read out by Jenna.
"He was the first to spread the faith of Inevitability in Trier. He obtained godhood nearly three years ago and became a Circle Inhabitant.
"He likes to disguise himself. In front of his collaborators, he pretends to only be a key member of the organization and not the founder.
"His wife and children were all brought into the mysticism world by him to become the bestowed of Inevitability. Apart from the deceased Roche, his wife and three other children are now Fate Appropriators. Of course, Constace has already been purged."
A demigod—a Circle Inhabitant—actually interacted with Low- to Mid-Sequence Beyonders like Loki and I Know Someone. He's truly sinister and cunning... I wonder if I Know Someone and the others noticed. If they didn't, they're truly living in their own world. They think the people around them are fools who can be exploited and squeezed dry of their value... Who's the hunter and who's the prey?
Lumian mocked the two key members of April Fool's once again.
Simultaneously, he gained a deeper understanding of the Sinners organization.
The cult had been established with the Sansons as its core.
As for how Voisin Sanson had come into contact with the faith of Inevitability and obtained the boon of an evil god, that was another matter.
From the looks of it, his business had failed, and he was on the brink of bankruptcy. With no other choice, he had tried various things.
"Why didn't Voisin Sanson let Guillaume Bénet know he was the leader of the Sinners?" Lumian attempted to confirm the details.
Guillaume Bénet was already a Sequence 5 Fate Appropriator, on par with the Sansons and other key members. He was significantly stronger than Bouvard Pont-Péro.
Once again, the calf satiated his desire to share information with

his typewriter.
"His Excellency Voisin believed Guillaume Bénet was overly ambitious. If he's involved in core matters, it will make him arrogant and do unnecessary things."
To put it simply, Guillaume Bénet's early conduct of the sacrificial ritual in Cordu had left Voisin dissatisfied. He believed that he had messed up the descent of the Inevitability angel. However, due to the entity known as Inevitability not punishing the Fate Appropriator on the spot, he could only suppress his dissatisfaction and temporarily accept Guillaume Bénet before marginalizing him? Lumian roughly grasped Voisin Sanson's take on the matter from Bouvard's response.
He pondered for a moment and changed the question.
"Has Voisin Sanson occasionally contacted you after visiting that place? What are you responsible for? Why do you think you need to be cautious and not make any mistakes?"
The calf's proficiency with the mechanical typewriter increased once more.
"Before His Excellency Voisin departed, he informed me that he wouldn't contact me for three months and would only return after the matter was concluded.
"Me and a few other members are responsible for managing different businesses and contacting different believers. We want them to focus on their prayers and businesses for the next three months and not cause any trouble. Likewise for the few of us."
Does Inevitability's oracle believe that the catastrophe will descend within three months? It's been more than two months since Voisin Sanson and company vanished... In less than three weeks, the problem will definitely erupt? Time is of the essence... Lumian inquired about the Sansons and the Sinners organization's current situation, but it was evident that Bouvard Pont-Péro didn't know much. He only knew about the matters under him.
Finally, Lumian pointed at the items he had retrieved from the other party's pocket and asked, "What are these? What's their purpose?"
The calf replied truthfully through the mechanical typewriter: "You were holding a gold coin of misfortune made using the Luck Transference Spell.
"I once encountered an extremely unlucky person and used the Luck Transference Spell to give him a new life. As a result, he became a believer of my lord. This gold coin of misfortune was the product of that help."
Once... Lumian frowned and said, "How long can the Luck Transference Spell of an Ascetic last?"

At the Alms Monk stage, he had relied on a ritual to transfer a target's fate to a corresponding item. The effect could only last three days. Beyond this time limit, if he didn't find another person to shoulder the fate, it would return to the original owner and couldn't be transferred again.

After becoming a Contractee, Lumian hadn't used the Luck Transference Spell again. He could only estimate that the duration would increase to somewhere in the vicinity of five to seven days based on the mystical knowledge he had obtained.

As he spoke, he focused on the 5 verl d'or gold coin in his hand and realized that it was entwined with blood-red—nearly black—luck. It tried to spread towards him but failed to do anything.

Ordinary misfortune can affect me, but extreme misfortune will affect the intertwined fates of Termiboros and me. Without the corresponding level, it can't shake the main stream... Lumian made a preliminary judgment.

The calf replied amidst the tapping: "Thirteen days is the limit of the Luck Transference Spell. If I want to raise it further, I can only rely on the abilities of a Fate Appropriator.

"In 13 days, if I don't have an enemy I need to deal with, I'll randomly choose a target and subject him to misfortune. Then, when his misfortune starts, I'll promote the power of Inevitability and help him change his luck. I'll obtain another gold coin of misfortune and a new believer."

Dammit, a perpetual motion machine! Franca, in her invisibility state, couldn't help but criticize.

Chapter 445: Spoils of War

Lumian was flabbergasted.

You can do that?

After careful consideration, he realized that it was indeed possible. The mystical knowledge that came with the boon only stated that if bad luck hadn't been transferred and returned to the original individual, it couldn't be affected by the Luck Transference Spell. It didn't mention anything about whether people whose fates had been altered by cursed gold coins and other items could be transferred again.

I can't underestimate others. Although they are mostly foolish and not very clever, they occasionally come up with strange ideas and unusual methods. Aurore had once said that no matter how foolish a person is, they will always succeed once after thinking a thousand times... As a Conspirer, Lumian couldn't ignore such a possibility. Otherwise, he might stumble over a proverbial obstacle sooner or later and fall hard. This experience provided Lumian with valuable insight.

Since he didn't show any signs of losing control or the potion's power dissipating after advancing to Conspirer, and he had already digested a bit of the potion, Lumian could pray for the Ascetic boon in a few days and gain the ability to establish a new balance.

Lumian gazed at the calf "sitting" there with difficulty and pondered.

"Can one keep repeating this process?"

Bouvard's hooves tapped on the brass mechanical keyboard, while Jenna read the contents of the paper.

"With each transfer of luck, the river of fate will undergo a certain change and advance to a higher level. This will result in misfortune occurring sooner. The difficulty of stirring it will also keep increasing.

"Two or three more people's fates on the gold coin of misfortune aren't something Ascetics can stir. The same goes for the unlucky banknote.

"An Alms Monk can only maintain one item of fate at a time, while an Ascetic can manage two."

The unlucky banknote referred to a single 20 verl d'or banknote that had originally been stored in the grayish-blue cloth bag. On the front was a bust of Intis's first president, Levanx, and a large dock on the Srenzo River.

So it wasn't that you didn't want more gold coins of misfortune, but you couldn't make them... Lumian nodded slowly.

"How much longer can the gold coins of misfortune and unlucky banknotes last?"
"Ten days." The calf quickly typed out two words.
Franca had heard Lumian mention the Luck Transference Spell, instructing her and Jenna to carefully distinguish spoils of war when facing those on the Inevitability pathway and not to touch anything they shouldn't.
Listening to their conversation, she muttered silently, *What unlucky banknotes?* I think they're life-threatening banknotes!
Before I transmigrated, I knew a little about such sorcery, but I thought it was fake and rooted in feudal superstition. But now, it seems that humans' thoughts and beliefs are similar in similar environments. Even the sorcery they create is relatively similar. Or could there be traces of an Inevitability evil god or a deity in a similar domain in our world?
Lumian pointed at the two metal canisters beside the gold coin of misfortune and the unlucky banknote and inquired, "What are they?"
"They're all Prophetic Concoctions," Jenna recited the sentence typed by the calf.
Prophetic Concoctions? I've always found them troublesome, so I didn't make them. Besides, if I were to find a corpse and administer the Prophetic Concoction, I might be secretly influenced by Termiboros, resulting in inaccuracies or misleading outcomes. Lumian shifted his attention to the item he found in Bouvard Pont-Péro's other pocket.
It was a monocle—something Lumian didn't dare to recognize—with a peculiar design.
Its main body was a thick, circular cover made of pale-white flesh and dark blood vessels, as if it could be worn directly over one's ear.
One end of the circle extended, connecting to a lens intertwined with a transparent purple tube, still flowing with blood.
Just now, when Franca put on her gloves and took out the item, a strange and illusory voice echoed in her ears, but she couldn't hear it clearly.
"What's this?" Lumian asked.
Bouvard tapped on the mechanical typewriter's keyboard.
"A dangerous mystical item. I call it the Eye of Truth.
"It seems to have been severely corrupted. All that's left is the ability to see through illusions and perceive the truth, the light of spirituality. If you wear it, you can hear the voice of some hidden entity at any moment and experience an irresistible negative influence.

"If you only carry it and don't touch it with your body, you'll only experience faint tinnitus and auditory hallucinations."
An incomplete Eyes of Mystery Prying... Lumian fell silent for a few seconds before asking, "Don't you have any ritual sheepskin or dog skin?"
"There are three ritualistic dog skins back home," the calf eagerly shared. He took the initiative to provide details even without Lumian asking. "The incantation for usage is 'Circle,' and the dispelling incantation is 'Arrangement of Fate.' Any language that can stir supernatural powers is fine."
Quite devout... Lumian exhaled and smiled.
"What other valuable items do you have at home?"
"There are banknotes worth over 13,000; gold coins, gold bars, and accessories currently valued at 30,000 verl d'or; 20,000 verl d'or worth of stocks and bonds, and real estate deeds for three houses." The calf listed his assets.
Stocks? I need to secure those stocks and sell them on the black market. Who knows if they will crash tomorrow! Franca keenly caught the keywords relevant to her.
Real estate that can't be easily discovered by official Beyonders and is difficult to liquidate with more than 60,000 verl d'or... As expected of the liaison responsible for a portion of the Sinners organization's believers and corresponding businesses... Lumian immediately inquired about the whereabouts of Bouvard's residence.
Finally, Lumian inquired about the other liaisons and important members of the Sinners organization, but Bouvard had limited knowledge. They mainly had one-way contact with the Sansons and handled their own specific tasks. Interaction with other members was minimal, with occasional meetings at the Sansons' residence once or twice.
Lumian listened quietly but didn't immediately decide Bouvard's fate. Instead, he turned to Franca, Jenna, and Anthony Reid, who was waiting outside the door, avoiding Bouvard's sight.
"With Paulina's assets, we'll gain 75,000 verl d'or, the Eye of Truth, three ritual dog skins, two bottles of Prophetic Concoction, a gold coin of misfortune, and an unlucky banknote," Lumian explained.
"None of you can take the last two items. Only I can carry them. In addition to them, I want the Eye of Truth and a ritualistic dog skin. You decide what spoils of war you want."
Jenna cast her gaze at Franca, feeling that her companion's "sacrifice" was somewhat excessive. She had the right to choose first.
Franca dispelled her invisibility and considered her options. She

finally said, "I want the two bottles of Prophetic Concoction and a ritual dog skin. Well, forget it, I can't get used to it yet. I'll switch to 15,000 verl d'or, all in gold!"
Jenna then turned her gaze to the door, signaling to Anthony Reid to make his choice.
Anthony's voice quickly reached their ears.
"I want two ritualistic dog skins. They'll be very useful to me. Ciel, I'll need your help when the time comes.
"Oh, and another 20,000 verl d'or."
Jenna realized that she had a total of 40,000 verl d'or left for her own selection.
She looked at Lumian with a touch of uncertainty.
"I'm essentially working for you as interest payment."
Lumian replied with a smile, "There are spoils of war even for work. Take them all. Have you noticed that making money has become easier since advancing to Sequence 7?"
Jenna pondered for a moment before saying, "Alright, I'll return 25,000 to you and 15,000 to Franca."
With this decision, Jenna's debt was significantly reduced, and she no longer owed Lumian anymore. The speed at which she was amassing wealth had surpassed her expectations.
As Lumian and the others discussed the distribution of the spoils of war, Bouvard couldn't help but find the situation intriguing. Most of the items they were talking about had once belonged to him.
He observed them engrossed in their discussion, and even the Demoness, who had been invisibly monitoring him, seemed to relax her vigilance. His heart stirred.
He sensed that Lumian wasn't an Ascetic, as he had questioned about those abilities. This indicated that the ritualistic cowhide covering him likely originated from Guillaume Bénet. The fact that he hadn't been awakened by the power of Inevitability while unconscious suggested that it wasn't a live ritual.
Bouvard was well aware of Guillaume Bénet's Animal Creation Spell item's usage and dispelling incantations.
After a prolonged interrogation, Bouvard's spirituality had somewhat recovered. He began to secretly gather his focus, preparing to recite the incantation of "His Grace."
However, just as the first word echoed within the brown cowhide, Bouvard's eyes narrowed when he realized that Lumian was looking at him with a faint smile.
"Hmph!"
Two beams of white light shot out and rendered Bouvard unconscious once more.

Lumian looked at the collapsed calf and chuckled.
"The test is completed. There are no other secrets. He only possesses the padre's dispelling incantation."
Rather than dealing with Bouvard first, Lumian had discussed the distribution of the spoils of war, hoping to uncover any additional secrets held by the Sinners organization's liaison, who had somewhat recovered spiritually.
Franca glanced at the unconscious calf and subtly hinted, "Should we take him away?"
Her suggestion implied taking Bouvard to the pillared square in the catacombs for sacrificial purposes, potentially preventing some of the boon's power from returning and forming Beyonder items.
Lumian considered for a moment before responding, "We might be discovered. Let's deal with him here."
Lumian couldn't teleport Bouvard to a specific area in the catacombs from the outside world. Various entrances were guarded by tomb administrators, and any suspicious activity might trigger their intervention or a police report.
"Alright," Franca responded after a brief pause. She added with anticipation, "I happen to want to try the Prophetic Concoction."
This experiment required a recently deceased corpse, one that had not been purified or cremated and had been dead for less than seven days.
Lumian stood up and gestured toward the door.
"Call me when Bouvard is dead."
He carried the Flog boxing gloves with him as he left the scene. Staying in the vicinity might disrupt the return of the boon's power.
Franca acknowledged his instructions and then turned to Jenna with a mischievous smile.
"Take care of this. This is your chance to act as a Witch."
"Can this be used to act as a Witch?" Jenna had previously found the Sequence name of Witch to be abstract and comprehensive, and she hadn't yet thought of a specific way to act as one.
Franca smiled and explained, "In mysticism, Witches are often associated with negative forces that bring catastrophe. They are seen as possessing mystical, evil, and powerful traits.
"Imagine this: a woman using black flames to kill someone and then pumping their corpse with a strange concoction to make prophecies about the future. It's sinister and mysterious, just like a Witch."

Chapter 446: Prophecy

Witches are associated with negative forces that bring catastrophe... Catastrophe... Jenna, in her role as an Instigator, had come to understand that instigation inevitably led to catastrophe. However, given that the outcome depended on the subjective intentions of the Instigator and the uncertainty of the recipient, Jenna was quite sensitive to the term "catastrophe" and believed it could be a key element in portraying a Witch.

At the same time, she confirmed a suspicion.

Negative force... Witches do indeed represent a negative force...

Sequence 2 of the Assassin pathway is called Demoness of Catastrophe... This means that even at the demigod level, catastrophe is crucial...

Jenna nodded slightly and approached the door of the activity room. She turned the knob on the wall, causing the gas wall lamps to emit a dimmer light.

After doing the same for all four gas wall lamps, the room grew darker. The faint light blended with the shadows, creating an atmosphere of impending terror.

Franca surveyed the room, her curiosity piqued as she asked, "Are you trying to create a dark, terrifying, and eerie atmosphere?"

Jenna smiled and said, "Don't Witches always appear in such settings in various plays and novels?"

"As expected of a true apprentice actress," Franca praised Jenna, a sense of pride swelling within her. She, too, had quickly grasped the essence of portraying a Witch. she had even experimented with concocting dark potions for a period, though it paled in comparison to the work of Apothecaries.

In the gloomy and dimly lit room, Jenna returned to the calf.

She leaned forward slightly and, in a deep voice, whispered two words from the Hermes language, "His Grace."

Nothing happened.

Outside the door, Lumian chuckled, recognizing Jenna's commitment to her role. She knew she lacked the bestowed powers of Inevitability and couldn't use the simplified Animal Creation Spell. To portray a Witch convincingly, she had to follow a predetermined process.

Lumian raised his voice, mimicking the grandeur of Termiboros, resembling a hidden entity responding to a Witch reciting an ominous incantation.

"His Grace."

In the activity room, an eerie darkness enveloped the area, causing the brown cowhide to split open, revealing Bouvard Pont-Péro. He

was dressed only in a white shirt, black pants, and dark socks.
With this accomplished, Lumian proceeded until he reached the entrance of 20 Rue de la Terrasse. Through the glass of the oriel window, he stared at the drizzle, which seemed to meld with the night.
Jenna crouched down and placed her right hand on Bouvard's forehead.
From her palm, black flames emerged, seeping into the Sinners organization's liaison.
These flames didn't crackle but engulfed Bouvard like inky water.
After over ten seconds, Bouvard's body convulsed violently.
Moments later, his body relaxed, and the smell of incontinence wafted through the air.
He had lost his life.
Dressed as a female mercenary, Jenna examined her attire with dissatisfaction. She stood and extended her hand to Franca.
Franca understood this as her acting as a mysterious and powerful Witch, so she handed her a bottle of Prophetic Concoction.
Jenna genuflected once more and poured the potion into Bouvard's mouth.
The dark liquid, bubbling with silver-black light, flowed into the corpse's mouth and lingered there.
A faint gust of wind blew, and the dim gas wall lamp's light took on a faint blue hue.
Sensing this familiar change, Lumian knew that Bouvard was now entirely lifeless, and the power of the boon had returned to its source. Thus, he turned away from the door, passed Anthony Reid, and re-entered the activity room.
Gulp!
The sound of the corpse swallowing the liquid reached his ears.
With a swish, Bouvard sat up. His face was deathly pale, and his eyes had turned translucent and devoid of color.
As Jenna gazed into those clear eyes, she marveled at their magical quality—the vibrant colors, the pure light, the invisible form, and the mercurial ripples. She endured the intense chill and then turned her attention to Lumian and Franca.
She had no questions; she was merely acting.
Franca motioned for Lumian to take the lead in asking the questions, as she aimed to learn how to make better use of the remaining canister of Prophetic Concoction.
Lumian, well-versed in the rules, carefully considered the inquiry and addressed Jenna, saying, "Ask, where is Voisin Sanson, the former owner of the Voisin Café in the Trier region of the Intis Republic, this time next week?"

This question carried not only its apparent meaning but also a hidden implication.
If Bouvard's corpse couldn't provide a valid answer, or if the response seemed abnormal, it could indicate that Voisin Sanson had left the place where the powerful bestowed resided, possibly signaling an impending catastrophe.
Jenna nodded and posed the question to Bouvard's lifeless form, her voice deep and enchanting.
The corpse's pale face, tinged with a hint of dark green in the dim blue light, opened its mouth and replied in Intisian, "Room 7."
Room 7... So specific? But there's no restrictive description from before... Lumian originally imagined that Bouvard's corpse would be like the deceased he had previously used, using a broader description like Trier's Quartier de la Princesse Rouge. This could narrow down the scope of the Tarot Club's investigation. However, he never expected Bouvard's corpse to directly reveal Voisin Sanson's room number.
To Lumian, this answer wasn't as useful as the Quartier de la Princesse Rouge. There were countless Room 7s in Trier.
Furthermore, what if Room 7 wasn't in Trier? It wasn't necessary to plan a conspiracy while in Trier!
Bouvard is a bestowed of the Inevitability pathway. He possesses the power of fate and the corruption left behind by the power of Inevitability... After his corpse consumed the Prophetic Concoction, it must have seen more than the average deceased and foreseen it more clearly. *Is that why such a change occurred?* Lumian muttered inwardly.
He then asked for confirmation.
"Ask him where Pualis de Roquefort from the Dariège region of the Riston Province in the Intis Republic is this time next week."
After hearing the Witch's relating it, Bouvard's corpse responded with an illusory and ethereal voice, "Room 12."
Room 12, Room 7... Madame Pualis and Voisin Sanson are indeed in the same place. The powerful bestowed of these cults in Trier are gathered together. They definitely aren't here for food and drink...
Lumian nodded slightly and quickly thought of what to ask next.
From the two responses, he vaguely guessed that it had something to do with where the evil god bestowed were. The Prophecy Spell appeared significantly interfered with and was unable to provide precise information. He could only ask in another manner.
A few seconds later, Lumian looked at Jenna and said, "When will Voisin Sanson leave his current building?"
This question aimed to determine the timing of potential catastrophe or the significant operation.

The strange scenes in Bouvard's eyes quickly dissipated. After hearing Jenna's question, he opened his mouth and replied faintly, "Rain, water..."
Suddenly, Bouvard's eyes burst open, and blood sprayed from them, leaving behind two contaminated black and red cavities.
His body started to swell, becoming pale, dim, and moist, as if he had been submerged in water for an extended period.
In the blink of an eye, the corpse vanished from the sight of Lumian and the others, as if it had never existed.
Franca, clutching the mirror and preparing to cast a curse on the mutated corpse, lost her target. She frantically scanned the area but found only remnants of the exploded eyeballs.
Drawing from her limited experience, Franca speculated, "Could it be that an extraordinary event or entity was prophesied, leading to a horrifying backlash that dragged him away into the unknown?"
She sighed and added, "See, divination and prophecies are treacherous undertakings."
Lumian nodded in agreement and suggested, "Let's leave now and head to Bouvard's residence to secure the remaining spoils of our mission."
"Yes, we must be cautious," Jenna said, gazing up at the ceiling. "What shall we do with Paulina and the other heretics? Should we eliminate them all?"
"I'll take care of it! I'll handle this!" Franca eagerly raised her hand. "I want to find some enjoyment, no—pleasure for myself!"
She wanted to simply act.
Observing the perplexed expressions on Jenna and Lumian's faces, Franca retorted,
"What's on your minds? I'm not talking about that! That's not the only way to have pleasure!"
Doing something to entertain herself? Lumian scoffed and walked out of the activity room, leaving a parting remark. "You have five minutes."
Five minutes? Franca muttered as she settled in front of the brass mechanical typewriter. Donning gloves, she swiftly typed on the keyboard.
Before long, Paulina, the butler, and the others who were securely bound had notes attached to them. The notes read:
"We're heretics!"
"Our faith is in an entity known as Inevitability!"
"Arrest us!"
"Our leader is Voisin Sanson!"
"Voisin Sanson and his core subordinates have gone somewhere. It's said that they'll stay for three months!"

"They went there over two months ago!
"I have Regeneration, Danger Premonition, and Electric Arc. Please be careful!"
After pasting the papers, Franca scanned the notes with a sense of delight.
She then turned her attention to the unconscious Paulina and remarked, "A Dancer's flexibility might help you escape the ropes. I can only add two more layers of unconsciousness to you."
With that, she ignited Paulina's Spirit Body with black flames, significantly weakening her. She followed this with the Bliss Society's sedative.
Clap! Clap! Franca clapped her hands together and left the room, leaving behind black flames that burned all kinds of traces.
...
After ensuring the success of their police report, Lumian and his companions retrieved assets that could be quickly converted into cash from Bouvard's residence in the library district.
Reverting to his original appearance and taking a carriage back to the market district, Lumian was on the verge of inquiring Franca about something when he noticed a figure darting through the darkness outside the window.
The figure was dressed in a white shirt, black pants, and dark socks. Its eye sockets were hollow and empty, and its skin appeared swollen and pale, as if it had been soaked in water.
Bouvard Pont-Péro!
Bouvard Pont-Péro's previously vanished corpse!

Chapter 447: Association and Speculation

Lumian's body tensed, then he quickly relaxed.

He calmly shifted his gaze away from the carriage window, as if he hadn't noticed anything.

"What's the matter?" Anthony Reid inquired of Lumian.

Lumian chuckled. "Nothing."

Franca, seated across from him, remarked, "Your smile and your responses always make me suspect you're up to no good!"

Lumian's lips curved into a smile.

"When you assume I'm up to no good, only to discover I haven't done anything, could it be seen as a conspiracy?"

"Why does your sister always teach you such things?" Franca critiqued, sounding "severe."

Jenna glanced at Lumian but didn't press for more information. She remained on guard.

The four-wheeled rental carriage returned to Rue des Blouses Blanches in the market district. The team didn't immediately go their separate ways. Following Lumian's suggestion, they gathered in Franca's apartment to discuss Bouvard's "confession" and prophecy.

As Lumian closed the door, he suddenly spoke, "I need to use a bedroom."

"Now?" Franca's smile faded.

She sensed the seriousness in Lumian's tone and, considering the earlier events, realized that something had indeed occurred.

"Yes," Lumian replied, heading toward Franca's bedroom and closing the door behind him.

Jenna, Franca, and Anthony Reid exchanged glances but remained standing. They each took positions beneath the glow of the gas wall lamp, neither too close nor too far from one another.

In just three to four minutes, Lumian reemerged from the master bedroom.

Franca peeked inside and noticed that the curtains in her bedroom were drawn.

Lumian surveyed the area and smiled before Franca could voice her question.

"Let me introduce you to a friend, but I need you to turn off the lamps first."

"What friend? You're acting all strange. You can't even speak properly after becoming a Conspirer," Franca muttered as she turned the knob valve at the bottom of the black gas wall lamp.

Jenna murmured, "He didn't like to talk nicely before either. It always felt like a Provocation..."

This wasn't a Conspirer issue; it was a chemical reaction between his personality and the traits of the Hunter pathway!
Soon, the lamps were extinguished, plunging the living room into darkness. Only the crimson moonlight and dim starlight near the window provided some visibility.
Lumian looked at the glass window and waited patiently.
Franca, experienced, asked thoughtfully, "Do we need to activate Spirit Vision?"
"I don't think so..." Just as Lumian finished speaking, he saw a face reflected in the dark glass window.
The skin on the face was puffy, pale, and moist. The eyes were empty, save for two black holes that were dyed red!
Bouvard Pont-Péro's vanished corpse reappeared!
Jenna, who had little experience with such situations, took a step back in fear, and black flames ignited in her palm.
"Has... has it been following us?" Franca had already taken out a mirror.
"That's right," Lumian said with a relaxed smile. "According to my observations, it only appears in a very dark environment. As for when it will attack us, I'm not sure yet."
"Aren't you worried or nervous? This thing is a severely corrupted mutated corpse. No one knows what terrifying abilities it possesses." Franca was affected by Lumian's relaxed attitude and didn't rush to deal with Bouvard Pont-Péro's corpse, which had its face pressed against the glass window.
Lumian chuckled.
"Shouldn't you be happy to see an old friend again?"
He paused for a moment and explained simply, "I regretted not being able to prevent Bouvard's corpse from vanishing.
"Although its prophecy has been interrupted, the source of the corruption and the backlash it suffered, as well as its traits, can point to many problems and some hidden entities.
"Isn't this also a clue?"
Just as Lumian finished speaking, Bouvard Pont-Péro's bloated corpse, as if drowned, suddenly fell backward. It was as if someone had grabbed his collar and yanked him out of the living room window.
Behind him, the darkness intensified, as if a strange tunnel had opened, leading to an unknown destination.
In the depths of the tunnel, specks of starlight flickered in the distance.
Bouvard Pont-Péro's eyeless corpse plummeted into the tunnel, accelerating and shrinking until it vanished entirely, swallowed by darkness.

"I just found a helper." Lumian's smile persisted.
Even if the four of them could easily deal with Bouvard's mutated corpse, Lumian didn't think anyone present could carefully investigate and determine the source of the problem while ensuring their safety. They had to seek help. In that case, it was better to seek help from someone capable from the beginning.
Entering the room to write to Madam Magician... Franca came to a realization and didn't probe further.
Jenna also guessed that the secret organization that used tarot cards as their code name had taken action.
Their members were connected by messengers!
Anthony Reid pondered for a moment and asked, "So, the next step is to await the autopsy report?"
"Not necessarily. Perhaps the autopsy report isn't something we can read," Lumian smiled and settled into an armchair.
He looked at Anthony Reid and gestured towards the divan, signaling him to take a seat.
"Did you find anything in your investigation of the Dreamseekers charity organization?"
It was a private charitable organization that had received a substantial donation from General Philip's widow.
Anthony Reid shook his head.
"No. In the past two months, they've been operating very regularly. There were no abnormalities. Perhaps, as you said, the key members of the heretics have gone somewhere. The rest have been instructed to behave themselves for the time being."
Lumian nodded slightly and turned to Franca, who had settled into the recliner.
"Do you know what happened to the Bliss Society?"
"It's similar to the Sinners. They've eliminated several key members, but the two most important ones seem to have vanished. They must have gone to that place too," Franca recounted the information she had obtained from Browns Sauron.
'They' referred to the Demoness Sect.
That place... Lumian leaned back on the sofa, his mind racing as he searched for any possible clues.
Ultimately, his thoughts settled on the prophecy made by Bouvard Pont-Péro's corpse.
"Room 7, Room 12... Where could it be?"
Anthony Reid pondered and said, "If it were a private house, there wouldn't be such a numbering scheme."
"Sounds like an apartment."
"Or a hotel," Franca added.
Hotel... Hotel... Lumian's eyes widened as a bolt of lightning

flashed through his mind, illuminating a detail he hadn't previously found problematic.
After he and Franca killed Beatrice Incourt, a key member of the Bliss Society, they found a note on her body. It read:
"Go to the hostel and retrieve the painting within three days."
Isn't a hostel a lower-class hotel? Isn't it normal to have Room 7 and Room 12? Lumian's thoughts instantly became clear.
At the time, he had thought that the note belonged to Beatrice, disguised as Theresa, who had purchased the receipt for a painting. Now, it seemed that the note belonged to Beatrice, a key member of the Bliss Society. It was very likely sent by the Bliss Society's high priestess, Siber, who resided in the hostel, for Beatrice to retrieve a painting!
"Hostel..." Lumian uttered the term.
Is that where Trier's numerous evil god bestowed go?
Franca, who had overheard Lumian's question about Theresa, remembered the note's contents.
Her excitement was palpable as she turned to Lumian and asked, "Did Voisin Sanson, Pualis, and the others go to that place with the codename 'hostel'?"
Lumian replied slowly, "We still need to confirm it," before swiftly inquiring, "Has Theresa, the art dealer, returned?"
He had questioned Browns Sauron about Theresa's whereabouts upon discovering the note. According to the member of the Demoness Sect, the art dealer had been sent to St. Millom, the capital of the Feysac Empire, for a business deal, allowing Beatrice to impersonate her without raising suspicion.
Franca responded uncertainly, "She should be back. It's been quite some time."
She hadn't paid much attention to the ordinary art dealer's activities.
Jenna, perplexed, interjected, "What's this about a hostel and an art dealer?"
Franca briefly explained, omitting Browns Sauron's involvement, attributing it to an operation against the Bliss Society.
Anthony Reid, after careful consideration, voiced his thoughts, "The problem now is that even if the 'hostel' is indeed where the heretics gather, we still don't know what it refers to or where it is."
Lumian sighed softly and flashed a smile. "It's better than having no direction."
He then turned to Franca and said, "Ask about the real art dealer, Theresa's residence tomorrow. I want to visit and confirm if the note belongs to her or Beatrice."
"Understood," Franca replied enthusiastically.

She had two motives: pressing Browns Sauron to determine when the assessment period would end and contributing to averting the impending catastrophe.
Back in her gaming days, she often chose storylines that involved saving humanity. Only when she grew bored of that did she experiment with something different.
Sigh, the phrase Demoness doesn't quite align with preventing catastrophe... Franca sighed inwardly.
Lumian shifted his attention to Anthony Reid, pondering for a moment before revealing his plan,
"Since they've all been behaving themselves, it's our turn to misbehave."
Anthony Reid, catching Lumian's drift, asked in confirmation, "What do you mean?"
Lumian's smile broadened.
"We'll abduct General Philip's widow and the true controller of the Dreamseekers Charity Organization and interrogate them!"

Chapter 448: The Power of Painting

The next morning.

Lumian changed into fresh attire. As he prepared to depart, a surprise greeted him when the "doll" messenger materialized from the wall, delivering a meticulously folded letter.

Madam Magician has unearthed clues from Bouvard's tainted remains? Lumian's spirits soared with anticipation. He expressed his gratitude to the messenger and proceeded to unravel the letter's contents.

"We possess limited knowledge regarding the evil gods beyond the barrier. The Hostel and its location still eludes us, but we have formulated some conjectures.

"In examining Bouvard Pont-Péro's corrupted remains, I discerned a corruption bearing a resemblance to the Apprentice pathway—a contamination from alternate dimensions and spacetime. Had I not intervened, unless it had manifested and attacked, you would not have been able to make direct contact with it.

"In the past, we've encountered similar instances, primarily involving artists, writers, and avid readers.

"We've observed that painters often descend into madness, but due to their artistic disposition, their ramblings and abstract fantasies often go unnoticed. Some of these musings unveil profound truths about our world, while others exert an uncanny influence on their surroundings, turning the fictional into reality. They emerge from canvases or pages, though their presence typically has a time limit.

"An example involved an artist who, under the influence of a psychotropic substance, painted an indescribable creature. This entity materialized from the canvas, murdering its creator and any other living beings in the apartment.

"I once encountered a perilous artwork, a Sealed Artifact that resembled a painting. The deity portrayed within it came to life and vanished, thankfully without triggering a catastrophe.

"Similarly, while confronting a deranged heretic, we encountered Gehrman Sparrow, the Queen of Ailment, and various characters and scenes that were originally confined to novels within the structure he inhabited.

"Fortunately, these manifestations lacked the full potency of their original counterparts. They possessed only a rudimentary semblance of their appearance, personalities, and abilities.

"It was confirmed that these creations were the handiwork of a deranged bestowed of an evil god. He had been a fervent reader of novels and, upon losing his sanity, instinctively recreated a

fantastical realm within his abode, mirroring the content of the novels.
"From this standpoint, it also bears some resemblance to the Spectator pathway, but it is fundamentally distinct. One derives its power primarily from the mind, while the other seems to harness the qualities and might of alternate dimensions or alternate spaces to manifest entities. Initially, it might function as a gateway or perilous portal, but in time, it could evolve into a near-real alternate space or even an entirely separate world."
As Lumian absorbed the contents of the letter, his eyelids twitched with a whirlwind of thoughts.
His initial reaction: *Is this something I can read?*
While some portions seemed manageable, others, particularly the elaborate examples and analysis, left Lumian's mind in turmoil. His heart raced, and he felt a peculiar tightness in his skin.
A deity from a painting coming to life and stepping into reality?
Is it that terrifying?
If the painting hadn't been sealed, wouldn't it be able to destroy the entirety of Trier?
Given more time, the entire world might have been finished!
Amidst this mental storm, Lumian's mind struck upon an idea.
What if I captured a skilled painter with similar powers and got them to create a flawless replica of Aurore's oil painting? *Could this act bring Aurore back into reality?*
It was akin to a resurrection.
After a tense pause lasting over ten seconds, Lumian released a long, contemplative sigh.
While his heart pulsated with the desire to attempt such a feat, rationality won the battle within his mind. The Aurore "resurrected" through this method would likely be a perilous entity, masquerading as Aurore, rather than the genuine person. If it was merely her appearance he sought, he could achieve it at any time with Lie's abilities.
If it was merely her appearance he sought, he could achieve it at any time with Lie's abilities.
In the wake of this realization, Lumian's thoughts turned to a mystical item he hadn't employed in quite some time: the Mystery Prying Glasses!
The brown gold-rimmed Mystery Prying Glasses, originating from a deceased Beyonder, held a mysterious and intriguing history. Its previous owner had crafted an oil painting infused with madness, vibrant colors, and a mesmerizing, psychedelic pattern before their untimely demise.
When Lumian put on these Mystery Prying Glasses, the world

around him transformed, revealing hidden truths that were once invisible. Occasionally, these revelations kindled a desire to sketch, resulting in drawings imbued with supernatural power, each with unique effects. For instance, they could cause an itching sensation across his body, ushering in warmth and radiant sunlight, aligning with Madam Magician's account of paintings by evil god bestowed that influenced their surroundings.

With the abilities granted by the Niese Face and Lie earring, Lumian no longer required the Mystery Prying Glasses for disguise. However, he retrieved them from his pocket and pondered for a moment.

Was its original owner a bestowed of a Hostel-related pathway, or did it come into contact with a corresponding item and suffer a certain level of corruption?

Yes, I'll report to Mr. K later and inquire about further details. Uh... The Aurora Order is fanatical about hunting heretics. Perhaps they possess more information about evil gods than the Tarot Club. Mr. K might know something about the Hostel...

Lumian was part of four different secret organizations and could gather information from four unusually well-developed information systems. As a result, he didn't have an urgent need to participate in mysticism gatherings. He only visited occasionally to join in the fun and listen to rumors and stories.

After stowing the Mystery Prying Glasses, Lumian continued reading the letter's content.

"Until now, the evil god bestowed following this pathway have been relatively passive, avoiding bloodshed and not frequently engaging in sacrificial rituals. Even if they did, it was usually confined to themselves and those in their immediate vicinity, minimizing the danger.

"However, their nature may not be as 'harmless' as previously believed. They could pose a significant threat.

"You might want to consult Termiboros about the Hostel. He possesses the most extensive knowledge of these evil gods and their bestowed. Although, don't be surprised if He chooses not to share."

Lumian set the letter ablaze with crimson flames and whispered with a chuckle, "Termiboros, do you know the meaning of Hostel and its association with which evil god?"

Termiboros's majestic voice resounded. "Not an evil god, but a great existence."

After retorting, He answered Lumian's question, "I'm aware."

Then, there was nothing else.

This provoked Lumian.

Was I hoping to hear you say you are aware or not? What I wanted to know what it represents and to which pathway it belongs!
After pressing further, Termiboros asked in a deep voice, "Do you truly wish to know?"
Lumian, sensing danger, responded cautiously, "There's no need for an honorific name or other details about the evil god. Just describe the situation and characteristics of the corresponding pathway of Hostel."
Termiboros fell silent, withholding the requested information.
Lumian scoffed, believing that the entity's response indicated: "I have nothing to lose. Why not give it a shot? What if my vessel suddenly turned foolish?" Termiboros had no intention of revealing details about Hostel.
He exhaled and left Room 207, prepared to find Mr. K for further guidance.
...
As Lumian made his way to Avenue du Boulevard, Franca had already met up with Browns Sauron.
Both were clad in hunting attire, armed with double-barreled shotguns, and positioned at the edge of the East Lognes Forest, where they took aim at wild deer hidden behind the trees.
"Browns, when will you f*cking end my assessment?" Franca stressed her original gender with a touch of stereotypical vulgarity.
Browns, her orange-red hair mostly concealed beneath a deerstalker hat, peered forward and responded, "Soon, soon."
Franca, her frustration palpable, retorted, "Does the high-ranking Demoness in charge of Trier want to keep testing me indefinitely, or are you playing tricks?"
Browns, her trigger finger poised, stopped abruptly, a subtle change in her expression evident.
"Could it really be you?" Franca exclaimed in surprise.
Browns replied solemnly, "I merely suggested it. The higher-ups agreed."
"Why on earth would she agree to such an absurd proposal? Is she your mother?" Franca cursed.
Bang! Browns squeezed the trigger, and the bullet pierced through the forest, narrowly missing the wild deer.
Watching this, Franca mused, Could they really be related, or perhaps they're intimate lovers?
The Demoness Sect is essentially a family, and it's common for members to have some familial connections...
The Sauron family once held sway in the neighboring Assassin pathway, so it's not inconceivable that the Demoness Sect has infiltrated certain branches over the years.

Observing Franca's silence, Browns cleared her throat and made an offer, "If you promise not to partake in the Red House Café's orgies, your assessment will end this week."
"..." Franca fought the urge to curse and burst into laughter instead. "Haha, I'd call you 'pure,' but you're quite the expert in female orgies. As for 'promiscuous,' you're selective with your participants."
Without waiting for Browns's reply, Franca continued, "I can promise that. Besides, I can organize orgies myself."
Her true intentions were rooted in the impending catastrophe that might engulf Trier in a week or two. She needed to swiftly infiltrate the Demoness Sect and procure valuable information. After the crisis subsided, and if she was still alive, she could contemplate participating in Browns's orgies.
A true man could be indulgent and flashy, but when necessary, he could bear personal hardships.
Browns turned her head to scrutinize Franca, who met her gaze without a hint of guilt.
After almost ten seconds, Browns whispered, "Remember what you just said."
Franca responded with a smile, signifying her agreement.
With the assessment period now set to conclude, Franca raised her shotgun and shared,
"Some time ago, Ciel and I ventured into the catacombs and reached the Krismona Night Pillar. I had a peculiar feeling about that pillar. Could it have been left behind by a Fourth Epoch Demoness?"
After hearing about the sigh from Jenna, Franca had become intrigued by the Krismona Night Pillar.
"Ciel? Your lover?" Browns turned to Franca.
Franca replied candidly, "Yes."
Browns fell into a brief silence before revealing, "Krismona is indeed a Fourth Epoch Demoness. S-She is the child of the Goddess."

Chapter 449: Tracking Clues

Chapter 449 Tracking Clues

A child of the Goddess... Franca jumped in fright, almost causing the double-barreled shotgun, which wasn't aimed at the target, to discharge accidentally.

She glanced at Browns and sought confirmation, "A child of the Primordial One?"

Even though her assessment period wasn't yet over, she had already passed the audit and was now considered an associate member of the Demoness Sect. She knew that this secret organization worshiped the deity known as the Primordial Demoness, often referring to Her as the "Primordial One."

Browns nodded slowly and replied, "As far as I know."

The Primordial Demoness had once given birth? Franca couldn't hide her curiosity and asked, "Who is Krismona's father?"

"I don't know," Browns cautioned Franca. "That's not something we should be privy to."

This is a scandal at the deity level... Franca thought to herself and shifted the conversation to her primary reason for coming to Trocadéro today.

"Has Beatrice Incourt returned from the Feysac Empire? Do you know where she is residing?"

"Why do you ask?" Browns inquired warily.

In her eyes, Franca Roland and her lovers were powerful and dangerous Beyonders. Only Jenna, who lived with her, seemed relatively ordinary.

Franca chuckled.

"Yesterday, I helped Ciel exact revenge and apprehended a heretic who believed in Inevitability. From him, I learned that many of Trier's bestowed individuals have disappeared to some mysterious and strange place."

"Based on the information he provided, we suspect that the 'hostel' mentioned in the note about Beatrice is the destination for these bestowed of evil gods. We want to confirm with Theresa whether the note is intended for her or Beatrice."

Browns felt uncomfortable hearing Franca mention heretics and the bestowed of evil gods.

In the world of mysticism, the Primordial Demoness had always been considered an evil goddess.

Of course, their sect, followers of the Primordial Ones, believed they were devoted to an ostracized true god, an existence shrouded in secrecy.

After Franca finished speaking, Browns replied, "There's no need

for you to seek out the art dealer. When we discovered that the Bliss Society's high priest and another key member had vanished, we patiently waited for Theresa's return based on the contents of the note.
"She told us that she doesn't know what the 'hostel' is, and she hasn't purchased any artwork from any painter staying at a motel. "We've verified the authenticity."
Franca felt a growing frustration and said, "It's really a message meant for Beatrice. Judging from the note, Beatrice knows the location of the 'hostel.' Otherwise, she wouldn't have the ability to retrieve the painting within three days.
"If only we had found the note first and performed the spirit channeling afterward..."
A realization struck Franca, and she sensed that fate was playing a cruel game in this matter.
It seemed like fate was conspiring to keep information about the "hostel" hidden.
Is Inevitability's power at play, or is it the evil god pathway that Ciel previously mentioned, using death to escape its original fate? Is information about the "hostel" destined not to be leaked? Franca's thoughts raced as she felt an increasingly abnormal aura surrounding the situation.
Seizing a rare opportunity, Browns immediately struck Franca down.
"Aren't you guys quite experienced? You conducted spirit channeling without thoroughly examining the corpse. The hour after death is prime time. There's no need to rush."
Franca considered explaining that fate might be at play, but she decided against it.
Why should she warn Browns and give her a lesson?
It was better to keep her in the dark, potentially for future exploitation!
Franca looked at Browns and clicked her tongue, saying, "You're quite the talker..."
Before she could finish her sentence, she extended her right hand with a smile and gently grasped the other party's chin.
"I don't mind skipping your orgies, but I'd like to undergo your 'assessment.'
"Are you up for it?"
Browns instinctively pushed Franca's right hand away, taking a step back and saying, "If you acted like a regular woman, I might consider assessing you, but right now..."
Her implication was that Franca's current demeanor resembled a libertine, a playboy who embraced Dandyism.

"You're a tough one," Franca scoffed, her words, though unusual, comprehensible to Browns.
She picked up her double-barreled shotgun and strolled into the forest without further conversation with Browns.
...
On Avenue du Boulevard, 19 Rue Scheer, at the base of the luxurious beige house,
in the basement, Lumian once again met Mr. K, who was cloaked in a black robe and a wide hood.
He had already reported the unusual silence of the cults to his superior, and Mr. K had verified this information after an investigative period.
Today, Lumian's focus was on Bouvard's corpse's prophecy, his own thoughts, and the Sinners' situation.
He relayed the information he received from Madam Magician as Bouvard's confession, including having seen a painting with strange powers from Voisin Sanson.
Finally, Lumian presented the Mystery Prying Glasses.
"Mr. K, has this mystical item also been affected by the Hostel pathway's influence?"
Mr. K stood before a red armchair and spoke in a low, raspy voice, "Wait a moment."
With a soft clap of his hands, he summoned an attendant into the room and whispered something to him.
As Mr. K waited for the attendant to return, the entire basement fell into an eerie silence due to Mr. K's silence.
Lumian felt somewhat awkward in this silence and thought to himself, Say something. Even sharing your faith would suffice. You can't just leave me standing here like a fool...
Of course, Lumian was well aware that Mr. K's silence was intentional, and he was likely communing with a deity or uncovering hidden information.
Before long, the attendant returned, holding an oil painting about half a meter in height and nearly 70 centimeters in width.
The painting depicted a dark forest, accentuating the turquoise grass illuminated by the sun.
Upon closer inspection, there was a white area on the grass that appeared to have been scratched, resembling a figure.
Mr. K finally spoke.
"It was discovered with the Mystery Prying Glasses. Apart from the mysterious and chaotic oil painting that can affect one's mind, there was also this artwork hanging on the wall.
"It was originally meant to be a portrait, but when we saw it, the person had disappeared from it. Only the scenery remained."

Walked out of the painting? Lumian felt a sense of alarm as he recalled Madam Magician's example.
He chose not to share this information with Mr. K, considering Bouvard didn't seem to be well-informed.
"Did something abnormal occur that caused the portrait to vanish?" Lumian inquired.
Mr. K's hooded head nodded slowly.
"Perhaps it returned to life and left the painting.
"It could be the source of that Beyonder's anomaly."
The Aurora Order appears to be quite knowledgeable... Lumian remarked sincerely, "A strange power, a horrifying phenomenon."
Mr. K added in his raspy voice, "We investigated fairly famous painters in Trier and found that, aside from a few who had completely lost their minds or even died long ago, most seemed relatively normal. However, there were instances of abusing psychotropic substances and alcohol-based drinks.
"Based on other information we acquired, we can confirm that it's not that painters easily become heretics of that pathway and gain corresponding powers. Instead, the bestowed of that pathway gain the ability to create art and naturally become painters. However, only a small number of them specialize in painting. The rest blend into society and create their own works without publicizing them."
"Is the Sequence name Painter?" Lumian asked thoughtfully.
This seemed to align with the power.
"God says yes," Mr. K replied devoutly and zealously.
Lumian immediately lowered his head.
"What else does the Lord instruct us?"
"God has revealed that foreign visitors stay at the Hostel." Mr. K appeared satisfied with Lumian's attitude.
Foreign visitors? Visitors from outside the barrier? Lumian's senses heightened as he became increasingly focused.
However, Mr. K didn't share further revelations. It appeared that this was all the divine guidance he had received.
Mr. K's raspy voice carried a hint of seriousness.
"Our most crucial task now is to locate the Hostel."
Without waiting for Lumian's response, he took two steps forward and continued, "The number of evil god incidents we handle pales in comparison to those holding official positions. Perhaps they have more information.
"It's inconvenient for me to directly intervene in this matter, but you can attempt to gather information from them through other means."
The Aurora Order seeks collaboration with the authorities, not necessarily to prevent the catastrophe but to thwart the ambitions

of these evil gods. For this purpose, they are willing to humble themselves and cooperate with the authorities... Lumian silently mused and solemnly agreed.

...

On the roof of Apartment 17 on Rue Doyle in the market district, Jenna, disguised to conceal her allure, met with Imre and Valentine.

She cast a glance at the verdant trees lining the street below and began, "I've got important information."

Valentine's expression turned serious.

"What information?"

He had been worried that the Assassin might inquire about the primary ingredient in the Witch potion, but now his attention was fully on work.

Jenna spoke truthfully, "I've received news that some individuals suspected of being followers of evil gods have gone to a place known as the Hostel."

She didn't mention the eerie silence of the evil god's followers. With the help of 007, this had become a consensus among Trier's official Beyonders. Jenna had already been given hints regarding what to focus on.

"Hostel..." Imre, who hailed from the Southern Continent, furrowed his brow slightly.

Such a reaction... Jenna keenly sensed their reaction and posed a question, "Do you know what Hostel means?"

Imre and Valentine exchanged troubled glances.

They didn't want Celia Bello to be fully informed, but if they kept her completely in the dark, she wouldn't be able to assist in gathering the necessary clues. She needed some information to know what they wanted her to pay attention to.

After a brief pause, Imre carefully composed his words and said, "One of our colleagues once heard the term Hostel from a peculiar creature."

Chapter 450: Infiltrating Openly

Chapter 450 Infiltrating Openly

They really know about the Hostel... Jenna couldn't hide her curiosity and concern.

"What kind of peculiar creature was it? What did it say?"

Imre glanced at Valentine before responding, "Under normal circumstances, it's an invisible creature. You can only confirm its existence through some traces and see if it's lingering around you."

Valentine explained eagerly, "From what I understand, it exists somewhere between the spirit world and reality. It's untouchable and difficult to detect with Spirit Vision. It's in a very peculiar state."

"I don't think that's all. According to the dossier, there are a few conceptual and abstract aspects about it. In short, you can only perceive it or sense its form through its reactions—if it's willing—or when it attacks you," Imre corrected Valentine.

Th-this is very similar to Bouvard's condition after his corpse was corrupted... However, Bouvard's corpse wasn't that formidable. As long as the environment is dark enough, it can be seen. Yes, according to Ciel, other than Beyonders of a few pathways who have reached a certain Sequence, it's indeed impossible to touch it directly and deal with it... Jenna made a connection and increasingly believed that the Hostel Valentine and company knew was equivalent to the one they knew, unless there were more than one of the same nature.

Imre, who had a habit of wearing skin-colored tape across the bridge of his nose, paused for a moment before continuing,

"If that peculiar creature hadn't attacked our colleague, it wouldn't have been discovered.

"We obtained several pieces of information from it. One of them mentioned the Hostel."

"What did it say?" Jenna played along.

Perhaps this contained the future direction of their investigation!

Valentine furrowed his brow.

"It only said that it comes from the Hostel—their home in this world."

Jenna didn't use her Instigation ability, but it was akin to instigation. "Is there any other information? Otherwise, I wouldn't know how to help you gather information and who to watch out for."

Imre hesitated for a few seconds.

"The rest of what it said isn't suitable for you to know.

"Yes, it calls itself a Pixie."

Pixue... An untouchable pixie... The corresponding Sequence name of the boon's pathway? Jenna nodded thoughtfully.
After a brief silence, Valentine said, "Our colleague encountered this peculiar creature in an artist's studio.
"As for the painter, he was once treated for mental illness. He always claimed to travel with his Spirit Body every night and enter a strange space that's neither in reality nor in the spirit world. He fought invisible creatures, strange souls, and evil spirits that attempted to invade reality through that space to protect the peace of the entire street.
"Such claims led to him being sent to the asylum for treatment for a period of time. Subsequently, he was under prolonged medication. Our colleagues confirmed that what he said might be true."
"It sounds like he's corrupted by an evil god... But why would he wander about as a Spirit Body and guard the street?" Jenna didn't mention the term bestowed.
Imre smiled disinterestedly and replied, "The power of an evil god isn't necessarily evil, but They often bring catastrophe or cause illusions and changes in the recipient's personality. Can you accept that you're no longer yourself?"
Jenna wanted to habitually respond using silence, but she remembered that there were two Purifiers opposite her, so she slowly shook her head.
Valentine's tone remained anxious.
"We're telling you this because we want you to pay more attention to painters, novelists, or those who have private hobbies of painting, reading, and telling stories. If you discover anyone's abnormal behavior and language, report it to us immediately."
"By the way, some painters' works also possess a certain amount of supernatural power. That's also one of the clues," Imre added.
Jenna nodded solemnly. "No problem."
...
Lumian, who had gathered a wealth of information from various sources, realized that although he and the others had a basic understanding of the Hostel pathway, they lacked substantial progress in their investigation. They still didn't know the location of the Hostel or the heretics' plans.
He had no choice but to turn his attention to General Philip's widow and the charity organization known as the Dreamseekers.
Late at night, at 9 Rue Lviv, Quartier 3, also known as the administrative district.
It was a three-story beige building surrounded by a garden, lawn, stables, a fountain, and statues.

"I was hoping to find an opportunity to ask for your help. I could use the ritualistic dog skin to infiltrate this place and search," Anthony Reid, with his buzz cut, said, glancing at Lumian beside him.
Lumian let out a chuckle.
"Official Beyonders can't afford to worry about such trivial matters in the current situation."
As he spoke, he crossed the street towards the beige building with sculpted outer walls.
The two of them circled to the side of the garden and watched as the two valets passed by together and turned to the front.
Lumian leaped up, pressing his hand against the white-painted iron fence. He stretched his body and leaped over, landing silently.
Anthony Reid was a seasoned veteran who had been forged by the crucible of the battlefield and maintained a habit of exercising. Although Sequence 9 to 7 of the Spectator pathway didn't significantly enhance his combat techniques, nor did his physique improve significantly, it didn't prevent him from easily vaulting the fence and entering the garden.
Lumian didn't bother concealing himself. Holding a top hat, he left the garden with one hand in his pocket and approached the main building.
Occasionally, he paused, avoiding the gazes from inside the building's windows and the maid who was eager to return to her room.
Before long, they arrived at the side door.
The wolf-shaped dog guarding the area had already fallen asleep.
Anthony Reid guessed that it was the doing of the two Demonesses who had long concealed themselves and whose whereabouts were currently unknown. However, he felt that if that was the case, why act as if they were infiltrating?
Lumian seemed to sense the Psychiatrist's thoughts and smiled.
"The sedative we obtained from the Bliss Society is very effective. We have to use it sparingly."
Furthermore, the Demoness Sect had already purged the Bliss Society once, leaving only two key members and Maipú Meyer, who was currently hiding in the market district. For the time being, no one was available to provide Lumian, Franca, and the others with supplies. Of course, the Demoness Sect had definitely gained a lot. After Franca passed the assessment, she should have a chance to obtain something from them.
Lumian walked past the unconscious dog, retrieved a wire, and expertly opened the side door of the building.
At that moment, almost all the lights in the house had been

extinguished, and the corridor was shrouded in darkness.
With one hand in his pocket and the other clutching his top hat, Lumian made his way upstairs to the master bedroom, openly treating it as though it was his own home.
Last time, he hid behind the scenes and instructed his partners to set traps. This time, he's using himself as bait to lure out potential problems? Different choices and different acting methods for a Conspirer? Anthony Reid followed Lumian from behind, enlightened.
Lumian reached the third-floor master bedroom. Along the way, he took a detour and climbed up from the second-floor balcony, avoiding the bodyguard at the staircase.
Gazing at the vermilion door, he chuckled and said, "After General Philip passed away, didn't his widow receive the protection of Beyonders?
"The bodyguards they hire with their own money can only scare off ordinary thieves and bandits."
"There are Beyonders, but Beyonders working as bodyguards not only charge a high price, but they also have an attitude. They typically don't do night duty," Anthony Reid recounted his observations during this period. "Let's pay attention to our volume later."
"At a time like this, the benefits of being a Sleepless will be revealed," Lumian responded in a deep voice as he used the wire to open the master bedroom's door.
Sleepless was a Sequence 9 of the Evernight pathway, renowned for not needing much sleep while staying vigorous.
Anthony Reid followed Lumian into the room and closed the wooden door behind him.
Then, Lumian donned a black top hat and lit the gas wall lamp on the wall.
In the yellowish light, they saw a woman wrapped in a silk blanket lying on the bed.
The woman stirred slowly, her wavy black hair framing a face that had seen four decades of life. Though traces of age marked her features, her skin remained remarkably smooth.
Her amber eyes gradually blinked open, revealing a faint yellowish glow. They fixed on Lumian's transformed face, courtesy of the Niese Face, and the black top hat.
Just as she prepared to speak, a cold muzzle pressed against her crimson lips.
"Relax. We're here for a small fortune and a few answers. If you cooperate, you won't get hurt," Lumian assured her with a smile.
Despite having her house broken into in the dead of night and held

at gunpoint, General Philip's widow, Annis, didn't dare to resist. She nodded quickly, signifying her willingness to comply.
"Look me in the eye. I want to be sure you're telling the truth." Anthony Reid lit a cigarette and brought it to his lips.
Annis subconsciously met the gaze of the intruder, doing her best to convey her sincerity through her eyes.
She couldn't help but notice the robber's unusually clear, dark brown eyes, as if they held the key to his soul. The cigarette between his lips burned with a fiery red glow.
The red dot flickered...
After a while, Anthony Reid, who had used his actions, words, and demeanor to lull Annis into a semi-hypnotic state, delved into the depths of her Body of Heart and Mind.
"Why did you donate so much of your wealth to the Dreamseekers charity organization?"
Annis's Body of Heart and Mind replied without reservation, "It was in Philip's will. If I didn't donate two-thirds of my assets to that charity, my child and I wouldn't inherit the remaining third."
There is something suspicious about the Dreamseekers, and perhaps even General Philip too... Lumian found it difficult to believe the general to be that generous.
Noting that Annis continued her life without any disruptions and seemed oblivious to any potential issues with General Philip, Anthony Reid changed his line of questioning.
"Was Philip still a devoted follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun?"
The Psychiatrist believed that the general's daily routines in a marriage were hard to hide from Annis, even when other problems remained concealed.
Annis's eyes grew distant as she replied, "He hadn't prayed fervently in a long time, and his praises were quite perfunctory.
"I overheard him whisper in the corridor once, 'Goddess bless.'"

Chapter 451: Fate's Prank

Chapter 451 Fate's Prank

Goddess bless... *Is he a believer in Evernight or an evil goddess?* From the looks of it, it's likely an evil goddess... Lumian made a preliminary judgment as he listened to Annis's answer.

Simultaneously, he sighed silently.

No wonder people who believe in evil gods love to convert their parents, spouses, and children into one. Otherwise, no matter how cautious they are, many details can't be hidden from their families who spend day and night with them...

Anthony Reid held the quietly burning cigarette in his hand and pondered for a few seconds before saying, "How did Philip die?"

The information he had gathered so far indicated that General Philip had succumbed to a sudden ailment, but that was the public declaration. The actual situation remained unknown.

Annis's tone drifted as she replied, "He had a heart attack in the middle of the night and couldn't make it to the hospital before he died."

Anthony Reid asked calmly, "Where's his body?"

"It was purified, cremated, and sent to the family cemetery in Quartier de l'Erato." What Annis said was public information.

Lumian turned to Anthony Reid.

"Ask her about the fate of his Beyonder characteristics."

He believed that Philip was definitely a Beyonder. After all, he had managed to rise up the ranks to general in the army, and he also came from an aristocratic family—the chances of him not being a Beyonder were slim.

After the Psychiatrist finished his question, Annis said in a daze, "What are Beyonder characteristics?"

Anthony Reid analyzed the mentality and knowledge of the individual and changed his question.

"Where did the thing that emerged from Philip's body go? Or did he have any special items on or around him? Where did it go?"

Annis recalled and said, "When the servant arrived to carry him downstairs to take the carriage, he told me with difficulty that if he died, there was no need to be surprised by any strange changes in his body. I was to stow away the thing that appeared and leave them for the children.

"L-later, too many things happened during the funeral, and I was too sad. That thing disappeared and was never to be found..."

Never to be found... Lumian had long suspected that General Philip was faking his death. Now, he was more inclined to believe it.

He even felt that the other party's Beyonder characteristics hadn't

truly emerged. The phenomenon Annis saw and the thing she had put away were an illusion created by a corresponding ability or ritual, and they naturally vanished in time.
Anthony Reid, who had discussed this matter with Lumian and the others several times, clearly had similar thoughts. His voice was calm as he asked, "What did it look like?"
Annis's Body of Heart and Mind replied in a voice, "It was his fist. It turned skinless, and the joints were like black metal. They were very sharp, and they easily cut through the back of the chair..."
The Beyonder characteristic fused with a certain part of the body, transforming into the potion's main ingredient... Lumian was experienced in this.
Anthony Reid further inquired and confirmed that Annis didn't have much information. She didn't even know the Sequence of General Philip's original pathway.
Seeing this, Lumian circled the master bedroom, and his gaze landed on a photo frame on the desk.
On it was a photo of Philip's family, but color photography technology that had emerged in recent years wasn't used.
In the family portrait, General Philip wore a high-ranking military officer's suit adorned with numerous medals. He wasn't too tall, and judging from the surrounding items for scale, he stood about 1.7 meters tall.
His hair was thick and slightly curled, and his eyes were small, but they had the sharpness of an eagle staring at its prey. The beard around his mouth was neatly trimmed, and the tip was even coated with paraffin. The bridge of his nose was unique, as if it had been broken and hadn't healed, causing the middle section to bulge.
Lumian observed closely and memorized Philip's exact appearance and characteristics.
If he had truly faked his death to escape his original fate, according to Madam Justice, this likely involved the loss of an old fate and the acquisition of a new one. It wouldn't alter his appearance.
In other words, the current individual was likely a stranger who looked identical to General Philip. Lumian hoped to recognize him at a glance if he encountered him in the future.
"Let's go," Anthony Reid concluded his Telepathy and said to Lumian in disappointment.
Lumian wasn't disheartened by the setback. He nodded gently and said, "To that charity organization."
The purpose of the charity organization, known as the Dreamseekers, was to provide assistance to outstanding young

men who had come to Trier to pursue their dreams but had temporarily fallen into a predicament. To this end, even the staff employed such young men and provided them with free apartments.
The apartments were located in a house rented by the Dreamseekers. The lower two floors housed workplaces, and the upper two floors housed staff quarters.
Ossa, who controlled the charitable organization, also resided there, indicating that he was genuinely assisting the Dreamseekers and not seizing the opportunity to amass wealth.
After leaving Rue Lviv, Lumian and the others hurried towards Quartier 2, the arts and financial district.
Quartier 2 was very close to Quartier 3, where they were currently located. Before long, they arrived not far from Rue Saint-Varro.
The Dreamseekers was located in Building 11 there.
As soon as they alighted from the carriage and before they could approach the street where their target was, Lumian and Anthony Reid saw crimson flames rising in the dark night.
Fierce flames transformed a building into a colossal torch in the night.
Lumian's eyes narrowed as he had a bad premonition.
After exchanging glances with Anthony Reid, they sprinted towards Rue Saint-Varro.
Thud! Thud! Thud! The two of them passed through an alley with a barricade and saw that the house that had turned into a fiery hell was Building 11. It was the office and staff quarters of the Dreamseekers!
The crackling flames soared into the air, sealing off the four-story building and scorching it black. No one cried out for help or attempted to leap down from the windows. It was as silent as if everyone had died long ago.
Residents of the street woke up and fled in a hurry, others wanting to help the firefighters or watching the commotion from afar.
Anthony Reid looked at the burning building and sighed. "We're too late..."
Lumian stared intently for a moment before slowly shaking his head.
"No.
"Perhaps fate doesn't want us to gain anything. No matter how early we arrive, we'll see something similar."
With so many evil god-blessed involved in the planning, investigations would inevitably encounter various forms of interference. Some were direct, some indirect, some seemingly normal, some rather bizarre, and some seemingly failing to gain

fate's favor.
Lumian paused momentarily before continuing,
"At least this means we're on the right path."
Anthony Reid fell silent for a few seconds before saying, "This indirectly proves General Philip's connection to an evil god's faith. My encounter with my comrades might stem from this..."
As he spoke, his voice trailed off.
Dozens of meters away from the burning building, Lumian's face mirrored the fiery inferno as he gazed ahead, his voice steady.
"Do you still want to pursue this?"
"This situation is getting more perilous with each passing moment. It's far more dangerous than the encounter with gunfire you've experienced before."
"Up to this day, do you still wrestle with the fear from that night, the sounds of sudden gunshots? Do you truly possess the courage and determination to press on?"
Anthony Reid lapsed into silence. The middle-aged man, battle-hardened and weathered, remained contemplative for an extended moment.
Before them loomed a house engulfed in raging crimson flames. Masked firefighters in their red and blue uniforms, citizens in disarray, and chaos swirled around them.
After an uncertain pause, the Psychiatrist, his receding hairline and slightly plump face, spoke softly.
"Perhaps I perished in that attack. What remains is an avenging spirit, relentless in its pursuit of truth and retribution.
"I can be vanquished, but I can't relinquish the pursuit. That's what I felt when you mentioned the existence of leads and hope."
Lumian offered a sly grin and turned toward Anthony.
"Welcome to the abyss of vengeance."
...
Returning to the market district, Lumian wasted no time in composing a letter to Madam Magician, apprising her of the night's operation and its final outcome.
He couldn't shake the feeling that the current situation had stretched beyond the capabilities of his team. Regardless of the clues they unearthed, it seemed as though the threads of destiny conspired to sever them, leaving their investigations seemingly fated to failure.
This uncertainty gave Lumian pause, making him wary of delving deeper into the mystery, fearing that their actions might inadvertently endanger the slim glimmer of the less significant leads on your own. Termiboros resides within you—a heavy stone capable of stirring ripples in the River of Fate. He's not easily

swayed, unlike the hope they still clung to.
Before long, the "doll" messenger returned, bearing neatly folded papers.
"All fates intertwine to weave a grand drama.
"Should you come across any future clues, share the vital ones with me. Investigate the less significant leads on your own. Termiboros resides within you—a heavy stone capable of stirring ripples in the River of Fate. He's not easily swayed, unlike the others.
"Furthermore, we shall make other attempts."
Other attempts... Lumian sensed that the Tarot Club had undertaken numerous clandestine endeavors, yet like his own, these investigations had ultimately proved futile.
Considering the Tarot Club's potency, Lumian suspected that this case might be met with direct interference from angels or even evil gods.
After reducing the letter to ashes, Lumian reclined on his bed. As he prepared for sleep, he contemplated the direction his investigation should take.
"Linked to the Hostel, individuals engaged in painting, writing, and those with a penchant for reading tend to encounter trouble..."
In the whirlwind of his thoughts, Lumian's mind settled on one person.
Gabriel, the playwright who had once taken up residence at Auberge du Coq Doré.
Gabriel had relocated to Rue Saint-Michel in Quartier 2, a district teeming with painters and authors. It was an ideal hub for artistic exchanges.
Mr. K and the official organizations had only ruled out well-known painters and authors. Countless aspiring talents who hadn't yet made a name for themselves flock to Trier. The investigation of all these hopefuls within a short span seems an insurmountable task. Moreover, many young dreamers pursuing artistic ambitions call this city home. The Dreamseekers had even thrown their records to the flames...
Lumian quickly reached a decision. At the break of dawn, he planned to visit Gabriel, inquiring whether the playwright had encountered any obscure authors or painters who had yet to garner recognition, or if any unusual anecdotes had circulated among these artistic circles.

Chapter 452: Manuscript

Chapter 452 Manuscript

At noon the following day, Quartier 2, Rue Saint-Michel.

Lumian quickly realized that it was only a short distance from Rue Saint-Varro, where the Dreamseekers charity organization was situated, just a block and a square away.

As expected of the arts district... Lumian raised his brows, feeling that he was drawing closer to the truth and edging ever closer to the answers he sought.

He glanced away from the Sun Obelisk standing proudly in the square's center and strolled along Rue Saint-Michel, tracing the path that winded past the ancient and weathered buildings.

He couldn't help but notice impoverished painters hunched over their sketchpads at the square's edge and along both sides of the street. Musicians played their diverse tunes with guitars, violins, and flutes. Every so often, white homing pigeons glided gracefully beside a fountain that sent water cascading in sync with the music.

The warm autumn sun cast a poetic charm over the scene.

Having spent a considerable amount of time in the market district, often consumed by thoughts of revenge, engrossed in investigations, or participating in banquets, Lumian had rarely immersed himself in the everyday life of Trier's core area.

Unfazed by the sunlight and the languid ambiance, donning a brown round hat, a light-blue shirt, and a casual brownish-yellow suit, he made his way into a bar named "Third-Rate Authors."

Here, most patrons sported well-worn attire, sipped affordable spirits, and engaged in animated discussions on various subjects. Occasionally, when inspiration struck, they'd retrieve well-thumbed notebooks and jot down their thoughts with the fountain pens they carried.

As Lumian approached the bar counter, he couldn't help but overhear a lively discussion among some of the patrons regarding the latest art exhibition.

"That piece called 'Cafe' is incredibly controversial. Some people laud it for its vibrant colors and audacious composition, seeing it as a silent protest delivered in an absurd form. Others think it's a deliberate attempt at abstract art, a ruse to dupe the public's intellect."

"I find it fascinating. The artist's ideas are vividly depicted through those overlapping colors. Just think about it. Isn't that how many cafés are? Noisy, bustling, with people from diverse backgrounds clashing and mingling like a chaotic blend..."

"I'm willing to call it a groundbreaking masterpiece of abstract art!"
"Are you talking about the kind of abstract art that's never been recognized or sold?"
Lumian couldn't help but think, Café... Isn't this the painting Mullen created using his buttocks? Someone genuinely holds it in high regard? Could it possibly become the most renowned and valuable work of his life? He pursed his lips, inwardly sighing. You Trierians...
Upon reaching the bar counter, Lumian spent eight licks on a glass of absinthe and raised his voice.
"Everyone, I have a question. If anyone can provide the answer, this glass is on me!"
As all eyes in the bar turned towards him, Lumian spoke up:
"I'm looking for the playwright, Gabriel.
"I need him to write a script."
In Rue Saint-Michel, nearly anyone one bumped into on the road could be an author or painter, let alone in a bar known for its literary discussions and artistic creativity.
Gabriel had frequent meetings with fellow writers and may even host private gatherings in his rented apartment. After all, "Lightseeker" had seen successful screenings and was quite popular, which would bring him significant benefits.
"He hasn't shown up for a few days. He claims he's locking himself away to finish a story," a middle-aged man near the bar counter responded to Lumian's inquiry with a smile. "He's probably swamped with scripts. Would you consider other playwrights? There are several equally talented young folks around here."
Hasn't shown up for a few days... Lumian furrowed his brows momentarily before relaxing.
"How will I know if I don't give it a try? I come with plenty of sincerity."
"Alright," the middle-aged man in the tattered formal coat murmured. "I hope you won't be disappointed."
He led Lumian to 34 Rue Saint-Michel and climbed the stairs up to the fifth floor, near the attic.
The outer walls and stairs had a slightly outdated but still well-maintained appearance, and it was notably cleaner and more spacious compared to Auberge du Coq Doré.
"This is where Gabriel resides," the bearded middle-aged man informed Lumian, rapping on the brown wooden door of Room 503.
A muffled sound echoed, but there was no response.
"Perhaps he's out searching for food, or maybe he's completed his work and gone to see the theater manager who commissioned it,"

the middle-aged man suggested with a forced smile. "Would you like to return to the bar for another drink? I'm an experienced writer myself, though I've never ventured into script writing. My novels sell quite well in the underground market."
"What have you written?" Lumian asked, glancing at the firmly closed brown door, showing no signs of anxiety.
The middle-aged man sighed and said, "I wrote 'Monk Pursuing Dog' and its sequel, 'Dog Pursuing Monk,' but they weren't published under my name. For one, it would lead to my arrest by spies, and secondly, my boss wouldn't permit it."
"A sequel?" Lumian hadn't visited an underground book market or a banned bookstore for some time. His last visit had been to purchase "Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles."
As he looked at the somewhat forlorn and slightly greasy middle-aged man, his perspective shifted.
He could be considered one of his initiates into the adult world!
"It came out last month," the middle-aged man replied, nodding gently. "These two novels have made my boss a fortune, but I didn't even get a tenth of that, no, not even a hundredth!"
"Boss?" Lumian inquired, recalling that Bard, a key member of April Fool's, had once authored "Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles." He saw this as an opportunity to gain insight into the workings of this profession and prepare for future tracking.
The middle-aged man sighed again.
"We don't have authorship rights, just writing tools for the boss. He pays us a fixed but tiny salary for our manuscripts, specifies the direction and requirements for our writing, and then sells them through his own channels.
"On Rue Saint-Michel, there are many third-rate authors like me who don't even have pen names. We're like assembly line workers."
Lumian, showing respect, asked, "May I know your name?"
The middle-aged man replied, "Rabe." His eyes were filled with hope as he gazed at Lumian.
Lumian probed further into the world of underground literature, gaining insight, and ultimately said, "If my attempt to reach an agreement with Gabriel falls through, I'll consider offering you an opportunity."
Rabe's joy was palpable as he responded, "As long as the boss doesn't assign me any new missions, you'll find me here at Third-Rate Authors every day!"
Watching the underground author, an initiate for many Intis youths, descend the stairs, Lumian took a wire from his pocket and unlocked Gabriel's door.

Compared to the playwright's room at Auberge du Coq Doré, this space was considerably more expansive, encompassing a bathroom and a small bedroom. Beyond that, it served as a living area, study, dining room, and kitchen. A coal stove for cooking was neatly arranged in a corner.

Lumian quickly surveyed the room and noticed a jumbled stack of papers that resembled manuscripts on the desk by the window.

He shut the wooden door behind him and proceeded towards the desk.

It's Gabriel's handwriting. Rabe was telling the truth. This is definitely Gabriel's residence... Lumian mused as he held the stack of papers and began to peruse them.

Moving into the bedroom, he spotted a pair of black dungarees casually draped over the bed. The sight confirmed his earlier suspicion—he was in the right place.

This was a pair of pants Gabriel had frequently worn in the past.

However, the playwright himself was conspicuously absent.

Recalling Rabe's statement that Gabriel hadn't been seen for several days, Lumian's caution escalated.

He meticulously examined every item in the room, much like a hunter tracking the movements of his prey.

After a few minutes, Lumian picked up a white-glazed porcelain cup with a single handle from the desk. He noticed that about a third of it still held cold water, with dust floating on the surface, too subtle for ordinary eyes to discern clearly.

At least a day. Lumian's heart tightened with concern.

What could have happened to Gabriel?

Was it possible that his prominence had attracted the attention of government spies seeking a "conversation"? Or perhaps he had unwittingly become the target of money-seeking kidnappers?

Setting the porcelain cup down beside the manuscript, Lumian meticulously combed the room, searching for any clues or signs of interest. His search yielded nothing of note.

Returning to the desk, he picked up the stack of manuscripts, eager to delve into Gabriel's work before his unexplained absence.

The script told the tale of a struggling author who crossed paths with a woman coerced into joining a criminal organization. Together, they found solace in their shared despair, pain, torment, and the harshness of daily life. They offered each other encouragement and warmth, ultimately leading to the author's recognition by the newspaper's editor-in-chief and a steady income. His reputation steadily grew, while the woman, still trapped in her circumstances, chose to vanish.

Before the story could conclude, it ended with a passage about the

lover's disappearance and the author's introspective musings:
"She's here;
"My beloved has arrived from the night.
"She's left;
"My beloved walked towards the distant hostel..."
The mention of the word "hostel" made Lumian's forehead twitch.
Though it was an ordinary word in a script, it stood out to him due to his daily contemplations and associations, sparking connections in his mind.
His gaze suddenly shifted from the manuscript to the desk.
At some point, the white-glazed porcelain cup with a single handle, which he had moved to the manuscript, had somehow returned to its original place!
Lumian's eyes narrowed, and the muscles under his clothing tensed.
As a Hunter, he had an unwavering memory for any alterations he made in his surroundings—it was a fundamental part of him!
A creature that is challenging to detect with the naked eye and can only be confirmed by certain traces. Lumian silently recollected the information Jenna had relayed from the authorities.
Suddenly, he reached into his pocket and retrieved a pair of glasses.
They were brown gold-rimmed glasses—Mystery Prying Glasses!

Chapter 453: Missing Author

Chapter 453 Missing Author

Lumian carefully positioned the Mystery Prying Glasses on the bridge of his nose, and immediately, the room seemed to whirl, and the ground beneath him trembled.

Suppressing his nausea and dizziness, he observed the scene before him fragment and overlap, creating a surreal and captivating tableau.

The bed pressed against the desk, which seemed to lean against the ceiling. Behind the ceiling appeared to be a tap, as if it were installed within a wardrobe. These scenes were like translucent canvases superimposed on each other, reflecting themselves in Lumian's vision.

A pale-white face materialized beside the wardrobe.

The face had disheveled brown hair, naturally parted. Dark-brown eyes glistened beneath black-framed glasses. It was Gabriel, looking cleaned up and as though he hadn't burned the midnight oil in a while.

The playwright gazed at Lumian with a vacant, distorted, yet strangely genuine smile.

His right hand reached out from the void, waving gently before his face shrank into the depths of the translucent layers, vanishing completely.

Lumian quickly surveyed the room, but Gabriel hadn't reappeared.

He promptly removed the Mystery Prying Glasses, replacing them with the Eye of Truth on his left side.

This mystical item, composed of pale-white flesh and dark blood vessels, covered the corresponding ear, allowing Lumian to hear rapid voices from the distant horizon. The intertwined purple blood vessels formed a lens that adhered to his eye, revealing faint blood, layers of colors, and the room with a third of it blending into the surroundings. An invisible curtain resembling mullioned glass was also discernible.

The latter two phenomena rapidly dissipated or gradually returned to normal.

Before the whispers could become more distinct, Lumian removed the Eye of Truth and massaged his throbbing forehead.

Based on the combined information from both mystical items, he deduced that Gabriel had been corrupted by Hostel, becoming a presence that couldn't be perceived or touched in the conventional sense.

However, the playwright retained a certain degree of rationality. He recognized Lumian and even happily bid him farewell.

Returning the white porcelain cup with a single handle to its original position seemed to serve as a greeting, an attempt to capture Lumian's attention.
Lumian frowned slightly. Why does Gabriel seem to accept his transformation into a monster and was even pleased. *When had he come into contact with Hostel?*
His gaze shifted to the manuscript on the desk. The story in the unfinished script felt eerily familiar.
Lumian picked up the manuscript and read it meticulously, at a slower pace than before.
After perusing the first section, he confirmed that the protagonist of the script was Gabriel himself. The character's personality, the details of his life, the cold treatment he endured, and the demand to produce vulgar works all aligned seamlessly.
Regarding the female lead, who immersed herself in the underworld and persistently encouraged the male lead's creations, Lumian couldn't help but feel that if it weren't for the difference in gender, he could be the one with such a background.
However, the female lead's personality, her way of speaking, and her encouraging words were entirely distinct from his own. Even in the scenes involving the mobs, Lumian could discern traces of Charlie.
In essence, the female lead's identity, background, and experiences in the mob appeared to be a blend of Charlie's and my situation. It was however someone else who interacted with the male lead. Gabriel had previously mentioned that only me and the human model Séraphine encouraged him at Auberge du Coq Doré. Charlie merely drank with him without mocking him or teasing him. A human model... that's right! The human model for a painter. Séraphine spent a night with Gabriel before moving out. Lumian rapidly connected the dots, sensing that the root of the problem might lie with Séraphine, the human model!
This woman had once accompanied a painter to a small seaside town as a model. After an extended absence, she returned to Auberge du Coq Doré.
Painter!
Could Gabriel have been corrupted on that night when Séraphine returned? Was it possible that Séraphine had moved to the Hostel?
Lumian meticulously perused the script, leaving no word unread.
Since this was a story born from Gabriel's own experiences, it undoubtedly contained numerous factual details and genuine emotions—invaluable clues!
As Lumian continued to read the script, bathed in the sunlight filtering through the oriel window, he sensed the concealed love

that resided within Gabriel's heart. He could feel the ache of remorse, reluctance, and the yearning for a relationship that Gabriel believed he could easily discard when he moved to a better neighborhood to start anew. In the end, he found himself unable to forget it.

The protagonist, increasingly aware of his heart's true desires and feelings, ceased to evade them and actively embarked on a quest to uncover traces of his beloved.

He sought out people who were acquainted with her, visited motels and hotels that occasionally haunted his dreams, and explored galleries in search of new artworks based on his lover...

Yet, his endeavors proved futile, leading him to compose the inner monologue.

It ended here abruptly... I can't tell if he found Séraphine... Lumian placed the manuscript down in disappointment and decided to check the drawer for any drafts, outlines, or notebooks that might contain further information or inspiration.

Regrettably, the contents of the drawer only covered the first half of the script. By the time Gabriel had reached the second half, he appeared to have delved deeply into his emotions and penned his inner monologue in a single burst.

Lumian looked at the papers before him, pondering the situation.

From the script and the other items in the room, it's apparent Gabriel hadn't managed to locate Séraphine...

In other words, he hadn't actually come into contact with the Hostel...

Furthermore, neither the script nor Rabe's description suggests that Gabriel exhibited any signs of corruption or boons until he ceased writing. While he was undoubtedly suffering from the loss of his lover, this was a typical emotional response...

So, why had this person suddenly transformed into an untouchable, unseen monster? Just knowing about the Hostel shouldn't lead to such a situation... Apart from me being special, Franca and Jenna know about the Hostel. Anthony Reid, Theresa, the Demoness Sect member in Trier, Mr. K of the Aurora Order, and a large number of Purifiers of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church all know about it. There are ordinary people and Beyonders among them, but none of them are in trouble...

Beatrice of the Bliss Society knows the location of the Hostel and aims to retrieve a painting, which was the reason Franca and I made a mistake. Bouvard of the Sinners prophesied a catastrophe associated with the Hostel, leading to his corruption into a peculiar corpse. The Dreamseekers charity organization likely sponsored heretics connected to the Hostel, such as painters and authors, and

they were destroyed at the slightest hint of exposure.
What was the reason for Gabriel?
Could he have recently encountered something that deepened his understanding of the Hostel, or perhaps he had found traces of Séraphine?
Lumian made a preliminary guess and conducted a thorough search of Gabriel's rented apartment with a clear objective in mind.
Nothing.
He then left 34 Rue Saint-Michel and made his way back to the Third-Rate Author bar, where he seated himself next to Rabe, who was engrossed in his drink.
"A glass of La Fée Verte," Lumian ordered as he tapped the bar counter.
Then, he turned to Rabe and inquired, "Do you have any idea where Gabriel has been over the past few days?"
Rabe pointed to a small round table near the window and replied, "You'll have to ask them."
As an underprivileged author working as a ghostwriter without a pen name, Rabe considered himself fortunate to know a rising star like Gabriel and attend his private gatherings. He had to work regularly every day to fulfill the missions assigned by his boss, preventing him from participating in their activities.
Guided by Rabe, Lumian approached the small round table and was taken aback upon seeing the four individuals seated there.
Weren't these the same individuals who had discussed Painter Mullen's art spoof art, "Café"?
In response to Lumian's inquiry, the leader of the group responded with a puzzled expression, "We last saw Gabriel two days ago. We all went to the Trier Art Center together to attend an art exhibition."
Art exhibition... Lumian's eyebrows twitched.
...
Trocadéro Town.
Franca, dressed in a white jacket, followed Browns Sauron, who wore a black coat, as they navigated through the manor adorned with grapevines.
With curiosity evident on her face, Franca, who had been invited, couldn't help but ask, "Where are you taking me?"
Browns cast a brief glance in her direction.
"I'm taking you to meet my teacher. You've successfully passed the assessment and are now an official member of our sect."
Browns Sauron's teacher... A high-ranking Demoness? Could this person be the leader of the Demoness Sect in Trier? Franca's

thoughts raced as she smiled and inquired, "Does this mean I can enjoy the membership perks?"
The term "perks" was coined by Emperor Roselle and had gained recognition in Intis.
Browns maintained a bit of distance from Franca as she questioned, "What would you like in exchange?"
Without hesitation, Franca responded, "The potion formula for Affliction."
Affliction was the name of the Assassin pathway's Sequence 5, often referred to as the Demoness of Affliction.
Browns let out a scoff.
"Quite bold to make such a request. Do you believe you have accrued enough contribution points to ask for the potion formula for Affliction?"
She paused for a moment before adding, "Of course, if you can assist the sect in achieving something, this can be your perk."
Franca, who had initially held limited hope and was merely testing the waters, glanced at Browns.
"And what's that something?"
Seizing the opportunity, Browns explained, "We've received information that the Iron and Blood Cross Order discreetly smuggled an item into Trier through an underground tunnel several months ago. If you can uncover what it is and identify its possessor, you'll be entitled to the Affliction potion formula."
A few months ago... The underground tunnel... Secret delivery into Trier... Franca suddenly recalled "Rat" Christo's loss of his biological brother.
In an effort to aid the Savoie Mob's smuggling leader in recovering his brother and the transported goods, she and Lumian had been drawn into a strange mirror world, where they narrowly escaped.
During their adventure, Franca had acquired a classic sterling silver mirror.

Chapter 454: Hidden Honorific Name

Chapter 454 Hidden Honorific Name

Franca had long harbored the desire to uncover the nature of the item that Gardner Martin had smuggled into Trier through "Rat" Christo. However, in the months that had passed, Gardner Martin had acted as if the incident had never occurred, and nothing of note had appeared around him.

From the looks of it, the Demoness Sect attaches significant importance to that item... That's right. Given that this item had triggered the strange mirror world, it is highly likely that it was linked to the powers of the Assassin and Hunter pathways... Franca took a moment to consider and then admitted, "I know what you're referring to..."

She explained to Browns Sauron in the same manner they had explained the situation to "Rat" Christo in the past. In essence, she shared everything except the fact that she and Lumian had been drawn into a mirror world. Instead, they relied on Lumian's unique ability to escape and how she obtained a classic silver mirror that led them to the mirror world.

"According to the 'Rat,' his brother and many of his subordinates turned into monsters, including the reversal of their left and right hands. This attracted the Purifiers' attention were eliminated." Franca deliberately elaborated, probing Browns Sauron gauge her reaction to the appearance of the mirror people.

Browns displayed a slight furrow of her brow.

"How did the official Beyonders become aware that something was amiss?"

She seems to know about the mirror people and their specific traits... Franca looked away and shook her head.

"For that question, you'd need to approach a Purifier, not me."

Without further discussion, Browns led Franca to a circular pavilion enclosed by grapevines and various vines.

Seated in the circular pavilion was a woman donned in a black court dress. Her bright dark gray eyes held a touch of sadness, and her neatly tied black hair featured a few loose strands, which cascaded naturally and added a hint of allure to her otherwise composed countenance.

Upon catching sight of the woman's slightly curved red lips, graceful jawline, and soft facial features, Franca was initially struck by the overwhelming beauty that met her gaze. However, her astonishment was quickly overshadowed by an unexplainable sense of sympathy.

Although she was taken aback and touched by a sense of

heartache, it took nearly ten seconds for Franca to remember encountering this woman before.
She had seen her during her and Lumian's surveillance of the fake Theresa, Beatrice Incourt, at the concert. As the most beautiful woman in attendance, she had been invited on stage to take a photograph with the orchestra as a keepsake.
Is she Browns's teacher, a high-ranking Demoness? It's no surprise; having a high-ranking Demoness overseeing the operation and ensuring its success... Franca was momentarily surprised but soon realized that this situation was in line with what she had anticipated.
What she hadn't expected was that this woman had openly followed them and even participated in a photograph on stage.
Browns Sauron introduced her teacher, saying, "This is my teacher, Demoness of Black Clarice."
Demoness of Black... According to Madam Judgment, Demonesses with a color in their title are considered exceptional even among the demigods of the Demoness Sect. Some are even suspected of being angels. Franca placed her hand over her chest and offered a slight bow. In a polite and gentlemanly manner, she said, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Demoness of Black."
Franca avoided complimenting the woman's appearance. She understood that most Demonesses in the Demoness Sect took pride in their beauty while simultaneously harboring inner conflict regarding it. Compliments from outsiders were typically accepted with grace, potentially leading to some embarrassment. However, if Franca, who knew their true gender, were to offer such compliments, it might be perceived as provocation or mockery.
Demoness of Black Clarice nodded slightly and said, "Every member needs to believe in the Primordial One. You should have known about this more than a month ago. It's time to officially pray to Her."
Franca was not surprised at all. Secret organizations that worshiped evil deities typically required new members to open themselves to their deity, thus gaining a measure of control and filtering out most insecurities.
Lately, when visiting Browns, Franca had followed Madam Judgment's instructions, conducting a preliminary ritual that sought the protection of an angel from Mr. Fool.
"We are all the children of the Primordial One," Franca responded devoutly and respectfully, adhering to Browns's guidance during this period.
Clarice's expression grew solemn, and her eyes were filled with admiration.

"Recite the honorific name of the Primordial One with me in Hermes.
"The source of all catastrophes, the symbol of destruction and the apocalypse, the Demoness who controls Chaos..."
Although the Demoness of Black spoke in Intisian, the surroundings darkened significantly. The grapevines writhed gently, as though transforming into venomous snakes.
Franca remained composed and repeated the three-lined honorific name in Hermes.
Suddenly, she saw grapevines extending towards her.
They grew thicker and thicker, completely enveloping the circular pavilion.
One of the python-like vines extended toward Franca, and a dark-blue vertical eye opened at its tip.
It reflected Franca's figure.
The figure rapidly distorted, transforming into a man with a bloodied face.
The man had short flaxen-colored hair, slightly thick brown eyebrows, and lake-blue eyes. His lips were thin, and his appearance was ordinary.
Franca was taken aback. This face was familiar to her.
It was the face she saw in the mirror every day before consuming the Witch potion.
This was her past self, Franco Roland!
In the deep-blue vertical eye, Franco Roland's expression turned ferocious. His eyes held a tangible hatred, and his face was filled with a viciousness that could cause nightmares.
Franca's body stiffened, as if she had turned into a statue made of rock.
After staring at her for a few seconds, the vine with the blue vertical eye retracted into the canopy of grapevines, its eyes reflecting its unhappiness.
Franca finally felt her body. She blinked and saw that everything around the circular pavilion was normal. Sunlight pierced through the gaps between the vines and shone here.
There were no python-like vines, nor were there any blue vertical eyes. It was as if the bizarre and nightmarish encounter had never happened. All of it appeared to be a fleeting, surreal vision.
She lowered her head and completed her prayer.
As Franca continued her rituals, she couldn't shake the eerie experience from her mind. The connection between the Primordial Demoness and the underground mirror world was undeniable.
She had encountered her past self, Franco Roland, in the mirror world as well.

This time, it wasn't Franca reflected in the blue vertical eye either. It was Franca's former appearance—Franco Roland!
Demoness mirror magic and mysticism's mirror world seem to hold many secrets. What Madam Judgment told me isn't everything... With this realization, Franca raised her head and opened her eyes to look at the Demoness of Black Clarice and Browns Sauron beside her.
Clarice, with a black veiled hat on her head, nodded.
"Now, you're a child of the Primordial One."
"Thank you for your guidance." Franca smiled and inquired, "I thought the honorific name for the Primordial One would include a description akin to the Ruler of the Mirror World. I'm surprised it's not part of it?"
The Demoness of Black, Clarice, replied in a cold, indifferent, yet pitiful tone, "This isn't the complete honorific name of the Primordial One. There are two more lines you can't know right now."
The Primordial Demoness has two hidden lines for Her honorific name? Franca suddenly felt that this detail revealed something, but she was uncertain about its significance.
Clarice continued, "Every new member receives a Primordial One statue. It possesses anti-divination and early warning abilities, and it can assist you in performing rituals. You must pray to it every day."
While speaking, she produced a bone statue, the palm-sized statue vaguely resembling a beautiful woman with hair that reached her ankles. Each strand of hair was intricately carved with distinct, snake-like eyes, some open and others tightly shut, densely packed and unsettling.
Praying every day... Franca hesitated, deciding to be patronizing on this matter.
After Franca stowed away the Primordial Demoness statue, Clarice's brow furrowed imperceptibly.
"Keep a close watch on the Iron and Blood Cross Order, especially Gardner Martin. If they make any unusual moves, contact Browns immediately. If the situation becomes critical, retrieve the Primordial One statue, set up the altar, and perform the designated ritual. After completion, place the prepared letter into the mirror on the altar."
Keep a close watch... Unusual moves... Franca extracted the key points from the Demoness of Black's instructions.
She sensed an impending catastrophe and couldn't help but grow anxious.
Does the Demoness Sect believe that the Iron and Blood Cross Order

is on the brink of launching a major operation?
...
In Quartier 2, outside the Trier Arts Center, Lumian stood on the steps, contemplating the authors' responses that flashed through his mind.
"Gabriel has been enjoying art exhibitions and galleries for the past month or so."
"He doesn't pay much attention to each painting. It's as if he's searching for the one his soul has been waiting for."
"There's nothing unusual about him."
"He didn't fixate on any other visitors at the exhibition."
"..."
The information revealed by these answers left Lumian puzzled about his next steps. Nonetheless, he had decided to visit the Trier Art Center to explore the art exhibition titled "Future Impressions."
It was scheduled to end in another two days.
Before arriving, Lumian had secured a hotel and a room for setting up a ritual. He summoned a messenger and informed Madam Magician about Gabriel's encounter and the direction of his investigation.
Initially, he had planned to relay the message from the bar's washroom, but he recalled that the "doll" messenger had severe mysophobia and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Consequently, he opted to spend a bit of money to find a clean and suitable place.
As he gazed at the colorful art center with its sun-like roof, Lumian took a slow breath and presented his ticket to enter the building.
"Future Impressions" wasn't a large art exhibition, occupying only three exhibition halls. Lumian strolled through, admiring the artworks displayed on the walls.
Suddenly, he spotted a familiar figure.

Chapter 455: Two Children

Chapter 455 Two Children

The figure he saw was a boy of about seven or eight, dressed like a young gentleman with yellow hair, brown eyes, and chubby cheeks. He had an honest and innocent aura, and Lumian immediately recognized him as Baron Brignais's godson, the peculiar boy, Ludwig.

Ludwig stood in front of a wall painting adorned with doughnuts, his young eyes fixated on the artwork. Sensing someone watching him, he turned around and spotted Lumian.

Lumian smiled and playfully teased, "Running away from home again?"

Ludwig, this time with more composure, replied, "No. I told my godfather that learning can't be limited to textbook knowledge. It's equally important to read more, hear more, and interact with other things."

Lumian inquired, "And he brought you here to see the art exhibition?" However, he couldn't spot Baron Brignais in the vicinity.

He noticed that Ludwig's intelligence and knowledge seemed to have improved a bit, allowing him to come up with an excuse he had used before.

It appeared that learning was having a positive impact on him!

Ludwig nodded and added, "Yes. It's important for a child to cultivate an appreciation for art from a young age."

Lumian clicked his tongue and continued, "So, no textbooks, homework, or exams today?"

Ludwig responded, a joyful smile unknowingly plastered across his face, "It's incidental."

Internally, Lumian noted, There's been some growth, but not much...

At that moment, Baron Brignais, donning a silk top hat and a black suit, approached from the other side of the exhibition hall.

Lumian couldn't help but make a mocking remark, "Aren't you worried he'll get lost?"

As a Conspirer, Lumian picked up on something unusual about this situation.

Given Brignais's past anxiety when Ludwig ran away, he shouldn't have left the child alone in the exhibition hall!

Brignais smiled and said, "Ludwig has been doing well recently and hasn't tried to run away from home. He was engrossed in admiring the paintings, so I didn't want to disrupt him when I went to the washroom."

Sounds like something an irresponsible parent would do, but Baron, you weren't like this before. I suspect you did it on purpose... You deliberately left Ludwig alone in the exhibition hall to see what this strange child would do? Heh heh, you don't have to worry about him. You have to worry about the surrounding visitors. If this guy gets hungry and you don't provide food in time, I'm afraid someone will be eaten, Lumian criticized as he made a guess.

He sensed that Baron Brignais had an ulterior motive for arranging this visit to the exhibition. It was akin to leading an experienced hound to a specific occasion, releasing its ropes to see if it would track down certain prey.

After answering Lumian's question, Baron Brignais, clutching his bulging briefcase, looked at Ludwig.

"When you get back, write an essay regarding the art exhibition, detailing your feelings and the work that left the deepest impression."

Ludwig's expression crumbled.

Lumian was not surprised. He had plenty of experience being thrown into such a situation.

Instead of conversing with Baron Brignais and Ludwig, he chose to continue his observation of the paintings. His attention fixated on the presence of any motel-like structures within the corresponding pieces, the existence of a human model resembling Séraphine, and the potential impact on the visitors' perceptions and their surroundings.

Regrettably, Lumian's exploration of the three small exhibition halls yielded no significant findings. Instead, Mullen's "Café" drawing, which he had created with his buttocks, drew the attention of numerous tourists, sparking both admiration and criticism.

Standing in the final exhibition hall, Lumian contemplated his next move. Retrieving his brown, gold-rimmed glasses, he decided to give them a try.

Since his unaided vision and Spirit Vision revealed no discernible issues, he opted to test the Mystery Prying Glasses from the same pathway!

Carefully positioning the glasses on his nose bridge, Lumian braced himself as the world around him seemed to spin and whirl. His focus remained on the scenes unfolding within his "vision."

Each painting took on a life of its own, breaking free from the confines of the walls.

Some of the paintings seemed to regard Lumian with a chilling, penetrating gaze.

Initially taken aback, Lumian feared that something extraordinary was afoot with all the portraits, potentially placing him in a dire situation. However, he soon realized that he wasn't under attack.
The figures within the portraits merely stared at him with silent and cold intensity.
It was as if they had attained a degree of consciousness and a sense of being, yet they hadn't fully emerged from their canvas confines to walk among the living.
A revelation dawned upon Lumian.
Through the lens of the Mystery Prying Glasses, he was witnessing another reality.
Perhaps, in some parallel aspect of the world, each painting held a semblance of reality. However, they remained two-dimensional, flat, and lacking in depth, incapable of significantly impacting the human realm or the spirit world. There might be exceptions, moments where extended contemplation of certain works induced feelings of delirium or anxiety.
It occurred to Lumian that Painters could potentially amplify the limited, flat nature of these objects, opening a pathway to the realm of the real.
In essence, the characters within ordinary paintings might possess an incomplete, condensed, and spiritually deficient existence in this two-dimensional, flat world. With the aid of the Mystery Prying Glasses, they were unveiled in their true form.
Likewise, Lumian's perception unveiled deeper truths—the artist's most profound creative intentions.
One painting depicted the future of Trier, a divided realm. On the surface, men and women reveled in lavish banquets, adorned in opulent attire. Beneath the surface, ragged individuals dwelled in dark tunnels, subsisting on earthworms, rats, and moss. Yet, through the Mystery Prying Glasses, Lumian glimpsed fat, glutinous pigs with oil oozing from their mouths on the surface. Below, grotesque, contorted visages and decaying hands reached upwards.
This was the true message the artist sought to convey.
In the next instant, Lumian spotted Baron Brignais and his godson Ludwig.
The former appeared unremarkable when viewed through the Mystery Prying Glasses, but there was a faint, brassy aura emanating from his form. As for the latter, something chilling unfolded as he abruptly turned his head, seemingly locking eyes with Lumian across two exhibition halls.
Ludwig's chubby face took on an unsettling transformation; his skin seemed to writhe, as if it were on the verge of shedding, and

something from beneath the surface attempted to burrow out.
Lumian's heart tightened, and he instinctively removed the Mystery Prying Glasses,
instantly restoring the scene to its normal state.
There's indeed something amiss with Ludwig... Thankfully, I reacted quickly. Otherwise, I might have seen something I shouldn't have... Lumian's head spun, and his feet felt like they were stepping on cotton.
He had always sensed that Ludwig was far from ordinary, but this encounter had sent his danger instincts into overdrive.
The true nature of the innocent-seeming human skin concealing the boy beneath remained an ominous mystery.
Ugh... Lumian had worn the Mystery Prying Glasses for an extended period this time, and his discomfort was overwhelming. Despite the diminishing dizziness, he felt profoundly nauseous, with a painful ache in his stomach, a pressing need to vomit and tend to other bodily functions.
Even a Conspirer's constitution couldn't withstand this.
Taking a deep breath, Lumian made his way to the washroom adjacent to the three exhibition halls.
It was situated at the end of a long corridor adorned with statues and paintings, perfectly in line with the Trier Arts Center's ambiance.
Once inside the washroom, Lumian attended to his urgent needs, and after washing his face with cold water, he gradually regained his composure, with the discomfort dissipating.
Exiting the washroom, Lumian's gaze naturally drifted toward the opposite wall, where a series of paintings were on display.
One particular painting drew his attention, a macabre and enigmatic piece that gripped his senses.
It was an oil painting set against a vividly layered background, with a focal point on a naked woman.
Her face remained blurred, as if the painter had intentionally left it blank. On her body, distinct faces emerged, each bearing a different emotion—anger, hatred, malice, joy. Some of these faces resembled those of cats, others of dogs, and some appeared to exist solely in the realm of fantasy. What united them was their eerie, translucent yet lifelike quality.
As Lumian stared at this unsettling painting, a thought dawned on him.
During Gabriel's visit to the art exhibition, he had seemed perfectly normal, at least as per the accounts of the authors. But they couldn't have monitored his every move, especially during mundane activities like visiting the washroom!

...
Avenue du Marché, Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
Jenna had just stepped out when she spotted a familiar figure standing beneath a gas street lamp on the opposite side of the road.
It was a young boy, dressed in a white shirt, silver vest, black coat, and a mercury bow tie, his light-yellow hair neatly combed.
The child who brought me good luck last time... that formidable Beyonder! Jenna exclaimed inwardly, taken aback. She instinctively crossed the street and approached the boy.
With a slight bow, she greeted him with a smile, "Were you waiting for me?"
The boy glanced at her and muttered, "I wasn't waiting for you. You were waiting for me. You met me earlier than any other choice."
What's the matter this time? Are you offering me good luck for the impending catastrophe and getting me to discover something? Jenna's thoughts raced as she casually asked, "Didn't you say that this direction was a little dangerous last time? Why are you here this time?"
The boy's response was measured and earnest, "That day was that day, and today is today. Just because it was a little dangerous that day doesn't mean it's dangerous today."
"Alright..." Jenna probed with a probing smile. "Do you need my help to buy you an ice-cream?"
The boy, however, responded with a long, almost adult-like sigh.
"It's something else; I'll pay you."
Pay? Giving me good luck? Jenna had a vague idea, but she didn't inquire about the reward. She decided to cut to the chase, asking, "What's the favor?"
The boy reached into his pocket and retrieved a gleaming golden coin, sidestepping her question.
"This will be your reward—a lucky gold coin."

Chapter 456: The Charlatan's Instructions

Jenna examined the gold coin in the boy's hand and noticed an unfamiliar portrait of a man wearing a crown.

Perplexed, she inquired, "This isn't verl d'or?"

The boy chuckled and explained, "This is a gold pound, more valuable than Louis d'or."

"You're not from Intis?" Jenna was taken aback, but she didn't think there was a problem.

The boy's appearance did differ somewhat from the locals.

"I'm Loenese," the boy with neatly combed, light-yellow hair replied honestly.

Jenna chose not to dig deeper, understanding that whether the coin was a gold pound or Louis d'or didn't affect its practical worth. Based on their previous encounter, she trusted the boy's ability to bring good luck.

She looked at him, awaiting his next words.

The boy returned the lucky gold coin to his pocket, showing no intention of prepayment.

Instead, he pointed at the ground and said, "At ten tonight, enter Underground Trier from the entrance here. Proceed as far as you can, following any available path, until you reach an underground river.

"Find a hiding spot nearby and wait for the first person to pass by. Take all their belongings."

"Before completing this matter, you can't tell anyone what you want to do or where you plan to go."

Go underground purely based on intuition and rely on luck to find prey? Jenna found the boy's instructions rather reminiscent of Ciel's "charlatan temperament."

As for how to acquire the person's belongings, there seemed to be only one solution: through combat; she was to subdue the other party!

Jenna knew the boy was likely a formidable Beyonder aligned with her cause, and without hesitation, she agreed, "Got it."

The boy smiled.

"When you obtain those items and hand them over to me, I'll pay you the lucky gold coin as a reward."

"How should I address you? And where should I find you when the time comes?" Jenna, aware that he wasn't an ordinary boy, couldn't help but speak in a respectful tone.

The boy mumbled, "You can call me Will. Talking to me like that makes me sound like an adult. I'm just in elementary school!

"When the time comes, you'll naturally encounter me."

Is he one of those born Beyonders mentioned at the mysticism gatherings? He's indeed young, but his abilities are outstanding? Jenna made a connection and followed his instructions. She replied with a smile, "Alright, Will."
Will waved her off and said, "You may leave."
But I'm planning to have lunch at the café diagonally behind you... Jenna muttered and changed direction to head back to Rue des Blouses Blanches for food.
However, after walking for more than ten meters, her curiosity got the best of her, and she turned to glance at the iron-black gas street lamp pole.
The strange boy, Will, had vanished from his spot.
Jenna took a closer look and realized that he had entered the nearby café and was now seated at a booth by the window, where an attendant had just brought him a cup with three scoops of ice cream.
He's truly just a child... Jenna mused, her curiosity satisfied as she continued on her way.
...
In the financial district, within the Trier Arts Center,
Lumian took out the brown Mystery Prying Glasses once again after having surmised something.
With no hesitation or fear, he donned the mystical item.
The exhibition hall had been his main focus, with the washroom separated by a long corridor.
Amidst the familiar dizziness, the oil painting in front of Lumian underwent a peculiar transformation.
The faces adorning the naked woman's body turned to look at him.
Simultaneously, Lumian sensed the presence of a creature on the rooftop, where the overlapping sky was, staring at him from a distance. It appeared to be trying to navigate the obstacles and approach him rapidly.
As the blurry face of the woman in the oil painting gradually clarified, her true identity became apparent: brown eyes darting, brown hair cascading, a plump, smooth-skinned face, and an air of detachment...
Lumian recognized her. She was none other than Miss Séraphine, the former tenant of Auberge du Coq Doré, the human model, and the lover playwright Gabriel had been searching for!
As Séraphine's face became clearer, Lumian's surroundings darkened, as if faces were on the verge of emerging from the painting or the void.
Quickly, he removed the Mystery Prying Glasses from his nose bridge, and all the anomalies vanished in an instant, leaving only

the sensation of raised hair on his skin.
As expected, the human model for this oil painting is Séraphine...
Although Gabriel is an ordinary person and doesn't possess the Mystery Prying Glasses, he once slept with Séraphine and knows her physical characteristics. That must have been how he noticed traces of his lover when he entered and exited the washroom...
Could it be that Séraphine possesses multiple faces on her body, appearing both painted and alive, just like this oil painting?
Wasn't Gabriel afraid back then?
After discovering the oil painting with Séraphine as the model here, he encountered that normally difficult-to-see creature when he returned?
The timing matches up—the water glass on his desk was more than a day old, and he visited the art exhibition two days ago... Something must have transpired late at night.
After being attacked and possibly corrupted, why did he remain in the apartment until my visit?
As Lumian's thoughts raced, he turned his attention to the oil painting's signature—Claude Pierre August.
The painter was not widely recognized; otherwise, his artwork would not have been hung along the corridor to the washroom. Furthermore, his work was perhaps added for the "Future Impressions" exhibition.
Likewise, he believed that since something had happened to Gabriel, Pierre might have gone missing. He had even gone to the "Hostel" when Séraphine moved out of Auberge du Coq Doré.
Regardless, I should inform Madam Magician. *What if there are any clues left behind?* Otherwise, they wouldn't have dealt with an ordinary person like Gabriel. Lumian had no intention of pursuing Claude Pierre August himself. This was because it would take a lot of time to gather information about the other party through various channels. And with the target's name and identity, an astromancy master like Madam Magician should be able to quickly lock onto the painter's residence.
In addition, Gabriel had been attacked late at night after learning about Claude, the painter. Lumian's current information was only a fraction of his own.
Lumian gazed at the oil painting, his lips curling into a smile.
Will I be attacked?
I'm looking forward to it.
...
Around 9 p.m., at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Apartment 601, Franca, recalling the Demoness Sect's mission, suspected the Iron and Blood Cross Order would soon make a significant move, and

her plan was to visit Gardner Martin while digesting the Pleasure potion along the way.
Rather than her usual method of knocking on the door and entering, Franca decided to take a more covert approach.
She intended to hide around 11 Rue des Fontaines, in the garden, or on the lawn, observing discreetly before finding Gardner Martin.
Recognizing Gardner's Sequence and abilities, she returned to her bedroom and retrieved a palm-sized Primordial Demoness statue, which she concealed in a pocket.
This would enhance her ability to remain hidden and reduce the chances of Beyonder powers detecting her.
"I'm heading to Gardner's." Franca waved at Jenna, opened the door, and left Apartment 601.
Jenna acknowledged and breathed a sigh of relief.
She was about to leave and was a little nervous.
Franca arrived at Rue des Fontaines via a rental carriage but chose not to have the driver stop at Building 11 as usual. Instead, she disembarked from a distance and swiftly disappeared into the shadows, stealthily making her way to Gardner Martin's residence.
Her familiarity with the surroundings allowed her to find a gap in the guards' patrol, and she nimbly scaled a side wall to silently descend into the garden.
Franca didn't attempt to infiltrate the building directly. Instead, she followed the shadows, circling to the edge of the front lawn. Next to a gas street lamp, she observed the grayish-white three-story villa, still illuminated.
As time passed, Franca remained vigilant, focused on observing the figures appearing at the windows and their activities.
Suddenly, the main door of the villa swung open, and butler Faustino emerged, accompanied by a figure cloaked in black.
The black-cloaked individual was of average height, standing at around 1.75 meters. Their entire form was concealed, making it impossible to discern their appearance or physical attributes.
Who could it be? Gardner Martin's partner, or a key member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order in charge of other regions? Franca wondered.
As the black-cloaked figure exited the iron fence while butler Faustino retreated into the villa, Franca hesitated for only a moment before making a decision.
She realized that unless she ventured inside Gardner Martin's residence thoroughly, she wouldn't obtain valuable information. Her earlier exploration had been open and yielded little. The cloaked individual might provide her with fresh leads leading to

unexpected gains.
Franca, who was invisible, touched the Primordial Demoness statue in her hidden pocket and grew confident.
She circled around the lawn's edge and scaled the iron fence, stealthily trailing the mysterious figure in the black cloak.
...
At 10 p.m., Jenna embarked on her journey into Underground Trier, an entrance not far from Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.
Lacking a carbide lamp, she relied on her Assassin's night vision to navigate in the pitch-black environment. Jenna was determined to commit the path to memory and proceeded deeper into the underground tunnels, trusting her instincts.
As she advanced, the silence around her grew ever more profound.
Jenna exhaled slowly, alleviating the tension and fear in her heart.
Jenna deliberately moved away from the tunnel's center, pressed herself against a rock wall, and continued cautiously.
After an indeterminate amount of time, the sound of running water reached her ears.
She proceeded for another seven to eight meters around a rocky outcrop, where a small river flowed slowly in the dark underground.
Jenna steadied herself, spotting a mottled stone pillar to hide behind, her form merging with the dense shadows.
She refrained from using Invisibility, recognizing her limitations as a Witch—the duration she could maintain her powers was limited, and she had no way of knowing how long it would take for the target to arrive.
In the silent underground, time seemed to stretch, and Jenna's mental stress steadily built up.
At last, the reverberation of footsteps reached her ears.

Chapter 457: Unexpected Target

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.

After briefing Madam Magician on the situation, Lumian left and went to the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise.

His next objective was to ascertain whether the enigmatic entity that had targeted him from afar, attempting to approach rapidly while he observed Séraphine's oil painting with the Mystery Prying Glasses, would pay him a visit during the night, much like how it had dealt with Gabriel.

He lay on the bed, closed his eyes, and gradually drifted off to sleep.

Lumian had full confidence in Madam Magician. As a Major Arcana card holder in the Tarot Club, she appeared to possess the ability to launch long-range attacks and was skilled at dealing with untouchable and enigmatic creatures.

As his thoughts blurred and he succumbed to slumber, Lumian found himself in a hazy dream, returning to Auberge du Coq Doré. Dim light filtered through the glass windows on each floor of the slightly tilted building. Gabriel, attired in a white shirt, dark jacket, black pants, and strapless leather shoes, sat on the entrance steps.

The playwright's visage was somewhat translucent, and an air of detachment lingered in his eyes.

Upon spotting Lumian, Gabriel stood up abruptly, a conspicuous smile crossing his face.

Lumian halted warily and looked at him.

"What are you doing here?"

Gabriel's smile waned as he spoke urgently,

"Leave Trier immediately! This place is about to become extremely dangerous!"

Lumian frowned and inquired, "What have you discovered?"

Gabriel cast a wary gaze around before responding, "I'm not entirely sure what they're planning, but I do know it will bring destruction to all of Trier."

They... Lumian pressed for more information. "Are you staying at the Hostel? Where is it?"

A hint of confusion appeared on Gabriel's face.

"You need to be like me to enter or gain the approval of the pixies.

"I didn't know how to find it. I found myself at the door as soon as I arrived."

As expected, the Hostel is closely related to the Pixies... Did Gabriel rely on the corruption to alter his existence and reach the Hostel like teleportation? Lumian's thoughts raced as he asked in a deep voice, "Why did you choose to go to the Hostel? Were you coerced

into it?"
"No," Gabriel shook his head, his voice softening. "I did it of my own accord. Séraphine came to fetch me personally, and I couldn't refuse. It's what I wanted."
A touch of happiness crossed his face.
It was Séraphine who corrupted Gabriel and led him to the Hostel... Lumian suddenly felt a pang of sorrow.
"Have you realized that you've become a monster?"
Gabriel fell silent for a few seconds before responding, "I know, but I won't harm anyone!
He paused a beat before continuing, "My script has already achieved success. I have the reputation and income I desired most. I have no regrets in that regard. All I want now is to be with Séraphine, whether she's human or a monster."
Lumian didn't scold or berate him. Instead, he looked at Gabriel and let out a long sigh. "I understand your feelings and thoughts."
Gabriel's face showed gratitude, and he spoke sincerely, "After becoming a monster, I seem to have the ability to see a certain future. That's why I knew you would come to me. I asked Séraphine to let me stay in the room for two more days to bid you farewell. She agreed. She's not a pure monster!"
Lumian's heart stirred, and he spoke in a bewitching tone, "Do you want me to rescue you and Séraphine from the Hostel?"
"Is it possible?" Gabriel's face contorted, and his eyes revealed a mixture of yearning, as if his body and mind existed in different worlds.
Lumian took a step closer and spoke earnestly, "There is hope, but I need you to tell me all the details."
Gabriel's expression shifted between blankness, coldness, excitement, longing, and rejection, each emotion expressed vividly. In that moment, he extended his hand, his eyes filled with intense fear.
Silently, Gabriel's form shattered, and the image of Auberge du Coq Doré disintegrated, along with the faint mist.
Lumian's eyes snapped open, and he found himself gazing at the ceiling of the second-floor bedroom in Salle de Bal Brise.
It had all been a dream, but it had felt incredibly real.
...
Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.
Franca, carrying the Primordial Demoness's statue, followed the black-cloaked man while remaining invisible.
The man appeared to have extensive experience and skill in evading pursuit. He frequently changed direction and even doubled back on his path.

If Franca hadn't relied on her invisibility and the assistance of the Primordial Demoness statue, she would have lost him several times.
Finally, the black-cloaked man came to a stop in front of an entrance to Underground Trier.
He half-turned and examined his palms under the crimson moonlight, leaving Franca perplexed.
What's going on? *Is he performing palm-reading on himself?*
Remaining hidden behind a gas street lamp pole, the invisible Franca observed his actions with curiosity.
After a moment, the man descended the steel staircase and disappeared into the dim entrance.
Franca followed closely behind, venturing deeper into Underground Trier.
Twenty minutes later, the black-cloaked man reached a sealed tunnel.
It was unclear what he touched, but a stone door immediately swung open on the rock wall next to him.
Franca, standing a few meters away, looked over and saw three lamps embedded in the stone wall.
Three classic oil lamps, one high and two below, each with a flame burning inside.
Franca had been in Trier for a long time and had a good understanding of the situation here. This scene triggered a connection in Franca's mind.
Carbonari!
She recognized this as one of the symbols of the Carbonari, an organization seeking to overthrow the government. Lighting three lamps was symbolic in their ranks—the one above represented the sun, while the other two below symbolized the moon and the stars.
The Iron and Blood Cross Order collaborates with the Carbonari?
Franca was both surprised and unsurprised.
From her perspective, the Iron and Blood Cross Order aimed to seize power in Intis itself by toppling the government, but their current focus seemed to be on the underground and the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier.
The black-cloaked man swiftly passed through the self-opening stone door, and Franca noticed a thin, ever-changing white fog emanating from inside.
This fog looks familiar. There must be something wrong... Franca hesitated to follow when she felt a slight tremor in her hidden pocket.
Franca reached out and touched it, her expression changing

slightly.
The classic silver mirror had trembled slightly—the one connected to the underground mirror world!
Franca remained in her concealed position, watching the stone door slowly close without taking another step forward.
...
Beside the flowing underground river, the figure moved swiftly along the water.
He didn't use lanterns, carbide lamps, or other sources of light, yet he moved through the darkness with ease, navigating around potholes, rocks, and obstacles effortlessly.
Jenna, hidden behind a mottled stone pillar, noticed a flickering red light in the target's eye.
Taking a deep breath, she retrieved the ancient Arrow of the Bloodthirsty from her black coat and prepared herself for the confrontation.
Her combat experience wasn't limited, but it wasn't much either. In particular, she had never faced a Beyonder alone. All she could do was use everything in her arsenal to augment herself from the onset. She had to go all out to minimize any accidents.
Jenna plunged the obsidian arrow into her chest, letting it draw her blood and come to live.
Before the figure could approach, she sprinkled fluorescent powder over herself and chanted a Hermes incantation at an almost inaudible volume: "Body Concealment!"
With that, Jenna vanished completely, blending into the darkness, her movements masked by the sound of the underground river.
Moments later, the figure with the red eye arrived in the area. Jenna watched from the shadows.
Suddenly, the darkness came alive beneath the figure's feet, forming inky black chains that wrapped around the legs, waist, and torso.
The figure stopped abruptly, a red light shooting from its eye.
From behind, Jenna's form materialized.
Only then did Jenna get a clear look at her target. He was a man, holding a grayish-white cloth bag and wearing a dark gray robe similar to that of a monk. His face was a menacing sight, constructed with iron plates, gears, springs, screws, cranks, and other mechanical contraptions. There was a vivid red gem embedded in his right eye.
A monk from the Deep Valley Cloister? Jenna's heart raced. She hadn't anticipated Will targeting a monk from the God of Steam and Machinery Church.
She and Franca had crossed paths with similar monks in the Deep

Valley Quarry before. These monks had augmented their bodies with mechanical modifications, giving them an eerie appearance.
Confronted with a target whose skull had transformed into metal, Jenna abandoned her initial plan of striking behind the ears. Instead, she concentrated a dark flame in her right palm and pressed it against the mechanical monk's head amidst the howling wind.
Simultaneously, a red beam shot forth, slicing through a few shackles resembling the Abyss. However, it only addressed the front. The other directions were already ensnaring the mechanically enhanced monk.
With a resounding impact, Jenna thrust the black flame into the target's head.
The silent yet menacing black flames expanded instantly, consuming the monk's Spirit Body and setting his spirituality ablaze.
Leveraging the high-speed agility granted by the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty, Jenna continuously shifted her position around the monk to evade counterattacks.
Simultaneously, she sought opportunities to weaken him to the fullest extent with the Demoness's black flames, bolstered by dark, binding spells.
In less than two minutes, the monk, unable to break free, collapsed to the ground, rendered unconscious and weakened.
Jenna exhaled and lowered herself to the ground.
She picked up the grayish-white cloth bag, untied the rope, and inspected its contents.
Inside, she found an array of canned paints and oil paintbrushes.

Chapter 458: Same Direction

Paint... Paintbrushes... Jenna stared at the contents of the grayish-white cloth bag for a moment, momentarily stunned by the unexpected discovery.

She quickly recalled the Purifier's advice and the recent clues they had gathered: Keep a close watch on painters and individuals with painting as a private hobby, as it was likely that some of their works possessed supernatural abilities!

Could this monk be a passionate painter?

Or was he simply delivering paint and brushes to an artist?

It seems like a routine task, but the fact that he had chosen the depths of Underground Trier for this errand raises suspicion. It didn't appear to be a matter of time constraints...

Either there's a problem with his destination, or the painter he's looking for is problematic. Perhaps everything is problematic...

A barrage of thoughts raced through Jenna's mind, leading her to suspect a connection between the mechanically enhanced monk and the Hostel they were investigating.

It was possible that an artist with supernatural powers was working on murals underground, requiring a substantial supply of paint and tools!

Jenna decided to search the monk's robe for any clues, finding only a few coins and banknotes.

She placed these items in the same grayish-white cloth bag and secured it with a knot. As she examined the intricate mechanical components that comprised half of the monk's body, she contemplated using the Demoness's black flames to incapacitate him once more. Her plan was to transport him back to the surface for an "interrogation" with the help of Ciel, Franca, and Anthony.

Being a Witch, Jenna had mastered ritualistic magic related to spirit channeling, but she lacked practical experience and was concerned about making a mistake that might disrupt their lead. She also needed a safe prayer target, so she intended to leave this task to the experienced Lumian and Franca.

As Jenna was about to put her plan into action, multiple gears on the unconscious monk's face suddenly began to turn on their own, producing an unsettling clicking and clacking noise. The mechanical parts came to life,

spinning wildly and devouring the flesh and blood on the other side of the monk's body, turning it into a gruesome mess.

The scene resembled a horrific accident in a factory where an operator had fallen into a massive machine.

Jenna's instincts immediately warned her of impending danger,

but before she could react, the mechanical parts, along with her own flesh and blood, lunged towards her.
Amidst the coexisting sounds of cracking and creaking, she transformed into a mirror, shattering inch by inch.
Jenna managed to reappear approximately ten meters away from the underground river.
Without looking back, she swiftly grabbed the grayish-white cloth bag and the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty embedded in her chest. She darted around the rock wall, making a hasty escape to the surface.
Behind her, the sounds of metal grinding and colliding persisted, but they couldn't catch up to her. Gradually, the commotion began to subside.
Finally, Jenna heard the crisp sound of metal parts falling to the ground,
and she couldn't help but let out a relieved sigh as she slowed her pace.
Jenna ran until she reached a named location in Underground Trier, where she finally slowed down and carefully removed the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty from her chest.
She could feel her strength waning due to the loss of blood, but she was grateful for her earlier caution in not removing the obsidian arrow from her chest when the monk had fainted. She had chosen to complete the search with it embedded in her.
If not for that, she might have been caught by the menacing mechanical body before having the opportunity to use the mystical item once more.
As Jenna assessed her surroundings and sought out the underground Avenue du Marché, she reflected on her harrowing experience. It felt as though the chilling tales Franca and Ciel had shared, along with their horrifying abilities, had become a reality.
The parts of the monk's body that had undergone mechanical enhancements had assumed an eerie lifelike state!
And the revived machinery was devouring human flesh and blood!
This is the true nature of the mystical world, where Beyonder powers are accompanied by unimaginable perils... Jenna turned onto the underground Avenue du Marché and made her way towards the stairs that would lead her back to the surface.
Simultaneously, she couldn't shake the suspicion that the enigmatic monk and the sinister secret cave she and Franca had stumbled upon in the Deep Valley Quarry were somehow linked to the impending catastrophe.
...
After the stone door closed, and the dark tunnel fell silent, Franca emerged from her hiding place and remained invisible as she

returned to the surface.
She replayed the scene she had just witnessed, trying to pinpoint the source of the familiar feeling emanating from the ever-shifting thin white fog.
Just as she was on the verge of resorting to Magic Mirror Divination or Dream Divination to find answers, a memory resurfaced.
She recalled the moment she and Jenna had eliminated the Deep Valley Cloister's Warlock-dressed man underground. A similar fog had appeared in the mirror during their spirit channeling!
The other party's exploded corpse transformed into a blood mist, revealing the corresponding characteristics, but the colors were different!
007 had informed us that by the time the Purifiers arrived in Deep Valley Town, their target had already shifted. The items on the altar were gone, leaving behind only cryptic words on certain papers...
Those words were Albert Goncourt, Underground, Riot, and Time...
Albert Goncourt is one of the leaders of the Carbonari... and this aligns with the three oil lamps I had seen moments ago! Could it be that the Iron and Blood Cross Order is collaborating with the Carbonari to incite a riot, possibly involving monks from the Deep Valley Cloister?
Hiss, could it be that the item Gardner Martin used to smuggle "Rat" Christo into Trier was requested by the Carbonari?
Is it located not far behind that stone door? Is that why my ancient silver mirror reacted?
Franca gradually connected the dots.
She realized the urgency of reporting this matter. Though it wasn't directly related to their primary mission of finding the Hostel, it seemed far from a trivial issue. If it escalated, it could lead to another catastrophe, and Franca felt compelled to do her best to prevent it.
In the next moment, Franca pondered her options.
Should I report to the Tarot Club, the Demoness Sect, or inform the authorities through 007?
She quickly made up her mind.
Only children choose to do multiple-choice questions. Adults select them all!
The only thing to be concerned about was that the reports weren't sent to the wrong parties.
...
Lumian awoke from his dream, his mind filled with questions as he slowly sat up and surveyed his surroundings.

There were no signs of Madam Magician pursuing Gabriel at the Hostel.
Madam Magician didn't realize that Gabriel had used a dream to warn me to escape Trier immediately? That's impossible. This lady possessed the ability to enter and exit my dreams at will in Cordu, and she is known to be the bane of these special monsters. Even Bouvard's lifeless body, which should have been untouchable, hadn't been spared when she dragged it away... Lumian paced back and forth in the room, pondering the puzzling situation.
He couldn't believe that Madam Magician wasn't paying attention. She had the means to observe from a distance, so there was no urgency in rushing to Salle de Bal Brise.
The insight he gained from Conspirer's influence left Lumian with a nagging sense that the dream was not what it seemed.
To deceive Madam Magician while communicating with him indicated that there was something extraordinary about Gabriel or the Hostel itself!
As Lumian was only a Sequence 6 and lacked extensive knowledge of mysticism, he refrained from speculating and instead sat at his desk, taking up a pen and paper to write a letter.
Knowing the "doll" messenger's preferences, he decided to send the letter only after returning to Auberge du Coq Doré, patiently awaiting a response.
Before long, Madam Magician's reply arrived.
"I didn't notice Gabriel influencing your dream.
"Initial considerations are:
"You have a close connection to the Hostel."
There's a close connection between me and the Hostel? Lumian's forehead twitched as he read the message, feeling as if a bucket of ice-cold water had been poured over his head.
How is that possible?
When did I establish such a bond with the Hostel?
Could it be that Gabriel used this connection to conceal himself from Madam Magician's scrutiny and directly influence my dream?
Lumian found Madam Magician's hypothesis absurd, but he couldn't help but analyze the possibilities.
As Lumian pondered the situation, a sudden realization struck him like a bolt of lightning.
Maipú Meyer!
Susanna Mattise's lover, the ostracized key member of the Bliss Society, the former manager of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, who had claimed to be returning to the market district to do something!

Could it be that Maipú Meyer had secretly done something in the market district that led to my unexplained close connection with the Hostel?

He wants to prove himself. I'm definitely one of the targets... Was it his plan for me to establish a close connection with the Hostel and detonate it at a critical moment?

How did he do it? I had a close connection to the Hostel without realizing it... Lumian subconsciously glanced at his left chest and suspected that Termiboros, the traitor, might have played a role in this matter.

Otherwise, he wouldn't have failed to notice anything amiss.

Amidst his surprise, Lumian didn't panic. Instead, he felt a sense of joy.

I wonder if I can use my close connection to the Hostel to find that place...

When the time comes, I might have the opportunity to meet the Sansons and have the support of numerous Major Arcana card holders...

Just as Lumian was about to write and inquire about Madam Magician, he heard soft footsteps approaching his room.

Knock, knock, knock. There was a gentle knock on the door of Room 207.

Lumian opened the door and was surprised to find Franca and Jenna standing there.

One of them wore a garish blouse, and the other was dressed as a female mercenary. Their expressions were serious.

Franca felt the need to communicate with Lumian before writing a report. "We've discovered something significant."

You've found something important too? Lumian was taken aback, pointing at the ceiling.

"Call Anthony over as well."

Nearly fifteen minutes later, Franca and Jenna shared their experiences in Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré, carefully omitting details about the Demoness Sect and Will.

As Lumian listened, his brow furrowed.

Some of the Deep Valley Cloister monks are suspected to be linked to the Hostel and the impending catastrophe?

That was an important cloister of the God of Steam and Machinery Church!

Lumian couldn't help but rub his temples, recollecting that something unusual had also occurred at the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Sacred Heart Cloister.

Are the two Churches no longer as reliable?

Could Trier still be saved? Could there be a future?

Chapter 459: Price of Bestowment

After Franca and Jenna, who were sitting by the bed, had finished speaking, the room fell into silence, creating a solemn atmosphere.

A few seconds later, Lumian flashed a self-deprecating smile.

"At the very least, those monks at the Deep Valley Cloister are still discreet when they're up to no good. It means they still have reservations, which suggests that the entirety of the God of Steam and Machinery Church isn't problematic. A significant number of clergymen, or maybe even the majority, are normal."

"I think so too," Anthony Reid agreed, raising his hand and drawing a triangle on his chest.

Lumian continued, "At this point, this is no longer something a small team like ours can handle. It's best to leave the Deep Valley Cloister's problem to the Purifiers and the Machinery Hivemind."

What he didn't say was that the Tarot Club would keep a close watch. After all, no one knew how many hidden dangers were waiting to emerge within the two Churches. What if someone triggered them prematurely, delaying the investigation of the Deep Valley Cloister?

"Alright," Franca concurred; it was her original plan to begin with.

With the plan confirmed, Franca and Jenna left Auberge du Coq Doré and returned to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Lumian drew back the curtains, gazing at the crimson moon in the sky. Casually, he said to Anthony Reid, who was about to leave, "Your best option now is to head to Suhit's steam locomotive station as soon as you wake up tomorrow and purchase a ticket to leave Trier. The sooner the departing train, the better."

Anthony, dressed in military-green camouflage, halted in his tracks, slowly turning around, his gaze locked on Lumian's retreating figure.

"Oh?"

Lumian poured himself a glass of light beer, which served as potable water, and took a sip. He continued to peer out the window and said, "You've been with us recently, and you've learned a lot. You should be able to discern the looming issue in Trier. The impending catastrophe will be dire. If you don't depart quickly, you might never get the chance.

"As for seeking revenge, for finding Philip, who faked his death, we can wait until the catastrophe is over. There's no rule stating you can't return after leaving Trier."

Anthony Reid fell into silence for a few seconds before slowly joining Lumian at his side. He too gazed at the night sky and

asked, "Why aren't you leaving?"
Lumian replied with a smirk, "Aren't you a Spectator? Can't you see we're on a mission? How can we just leave Trier like that?"
Anthony turned his head to fix his stare on Lumian's face and eyes, remaining silent for a long while.
Lumian held the light beer in his hand, his gaze still fixed outside the window. His eyes were vacant, and his focus seemed clouded.
After a while, he scoffed.
"Besides, I have the ability to survive such a disaster. I can protect Franca and Jenna, but only the two of them. Do you think you can compare to beautiful women who have a deeper relationship with me?"
His "protection" referred to teleporting Franca and Jenna to The Fool's cathedral at the Lavigny Docks.
Anthony didn't respond and looked at the dark sky outside once more.
Slowly, he retrieved a box of cigarettes from his shirt, took one out, placed it between his lips, and lit it with a match.
Taking a few deep breaths and exhaling white smoke, the Psychiatrist muttered to himself, "I was born and raised on the West Midseashire Coast. It's an area with many industrial cities, where the God of Steam and Machinery has more believers than the Eternal Blazing Sun.
"The wind in Midseashire is fierce. Summers aren't very hot, but they're humid. Winters bring snow, and everything is covered in white. The surroundings are either thick forests or pockmarked with coal and iron ore mines.
"When I was fortunate enough to become a Beyonder, my greatest dream was to retire safely from the army with some savings. I'd buy land near my hometown, close to the forest. I'd hire a few people to help me with farming. In my free time, I'd secretly hunt in the forest, breathe the sea air, or go fishing. Heh heh, you might not know this, but the fish in Midseashire are inedible due to heavy industrial pollution. Locals only eat it if they have no other choice."
Anthony Reid's voice deepened.
"If I were to return to the West Midseashire Coast and my hometown now, I might never be able to enjoy such a life. It's not about money; I need a sense of relaxation.
"I still have nightmares about our camp being ambushed, with corpses everywhere. Every time, I can feel my heart racing. I can imagine that if I leave tomorrow and see the news and photos of the Trier catastrophe in the newspapers, I'll have similar nightmares. I'll dream of Trier being incinerated by flames, with

corpses strewn everywhere.
"That time, I fled out of fear. This time, I don't want to do that again."
Anthony Reid took another drag on his cigarette.
Without waiting for Lumian's mockery, he added, "I'm well aware of my limitations, and all of this doesn't directly concern me. However, I've been in Trier for several years. I know many informants, neighbors, and children who will trade information for sweets or coppet. I don't want to hear about their deaths in a few days and see their pained faces when I close my eyes.
"I'll do my best to cooperate with you and do what I can. Only when there's no other choice will I consider retreating.
"You don't need to understand. This might be the paranoid decision of a patient with severe psychological problems."
Lumian chuckled and commented, "You make it sound as if nobody else has psychological problems."
Before completing my treatment, my psychological problems were far worse than yours!
A smile appeared on Anthony Reid's face.
"So, you chose to stay too, didn't you?"
He turned around and left Room 207, puffing on his short cigarette.
Lumian relished the night view of Trier, the enduring cacophony of Rue Anarchie serving as a backdrop to his contemplation. He emptied his glass of light beer.
Then, he took his seat, drew the curtains, and commenced writing to Madam Magician.
"New leads...
"There are now three investigation directions:
"Firstly, the Deep Valley Cloister and the Sacred Heart Cloister.
"Secondly, I can use the strong connection between myself and the Hostel to infiltrate the underground route that Jenna followed when she encountered the monk by the river. By following my instincts, I can attempt to reach the Hostel directly.
"Thirdly, an assault on Gardner Martin. Since the Iron and Blood Cross Order collaborates with the Carbonari, which is linked to the Deep Valley Cloister incident, they might be involved and have valuable information."
After dispatching the letter, Lumian paced his room, grappling with a mixture of worry, frustration, and anticipation.
Before long, Magician replied:
"We'll take responsibility for the first direction. I refrained from mentioning the second direction because it poses a significant risk to you. Furthermore, Gabriel's warning has likely been detected, so the Hostel will be on high alert against such intrusions.

"We can cautiously explore the third direction, but you must be well-prepared before confronting Gardner Martin."
Silently, crimson flames erupted, setting the paper in Lumian's hand ablaze. He planned to get some rest to recover from mental fatigue. At dawn, he would convene with Franca, Jenna, and Anthony to discuss their plan of action.
...
Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Franca hadn't changed into her cotton pajamas; she was still dressed in her daytime attire.
Observing her pacing the room, Jenna asked, her brow furrowed in confusion, "What's bothering you?"
Franca sighed and replied, "I intend to seek out Gardner now. Although Ciel didn't mention it just now, I can sense that he will propose dealing with Gardner in the next two days. This is a clear breakthrough. Sigh, I must seize the opportunity to digest more Pleasure."
Jenna regarded Franca's profile, pursing her lips before changing the topic.
"Don't you have many lovers? Even without Gardner Martin, there are others."
Franca couldn't help but clear her throat and smile wryly.
"Long gone, long gone. Gardner and his lovers are my current interests."
Jenna chuckled and playfully teased, "Without Gardner Martin, you can turn to Ciel."
"No, no!" Franca waved her hand vigorously. "I can't get past myself."
With those words, she headed toward the door.
"I'm going to Rue des Fontaines."
Jenna's smile faded as she offered a solemn reminder, "Don't display any unusual behavior later."
"I understand," Franca replied, her expression turning serious. "I won't let Gardner feel like I'm giving him hospice."
With that, she opened the door and exited.
Jenna let out a soft sigh as she watched Franca vanish behind the closed door.
Then, her gaze turned to the grayish-white cloth bag on the coffee table, and she muttered to herself, I wonder when I'll encounter Will to deliver this bag...
...
In the middle of the night, Jenna awoke suddenly from a vivid dream.
In her dream, she found herself in an underground quarry cave,

with Will standing before her.
Although it was only a dream, Jenna had an uncanny sense of familiarity with the location and knew how to reach it in reality.
Understanding the significance of her dream, Jenna nodded slowly and changed into her female mercenary attire. Carrying the grayish-white cloth bag, she left Apartment 601 and ventured underground through the entrance on Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Following the revelations of her dream and guided by her spirituality, she descended, turned, and squeezed through gaps at times. Finally, she arrived at the quarry cave she had seen in her dream.
In the center of the mine, Will, dressed as he had been during the day, held an orange jack-o'-lantern. He didn't appear particularly pleased, resembling a student caught playing hooky by parents and teachers.
"Is this what you want?" Jenna handed him the grayish-white cloth bag filled with various paints and brushes.
Will accepted it but didn't open the bag. Instead, he retrieved an item known as the lucky gold coin and sighed.
"This is your reward.
"This is both your luck and misfortune. It signifies that you will encounter many things and bear significant responsibility.
"You may not fully grasp it now, but one day, you will."
Ever since the heretics brought catastrophe to the market district, there's been no turning back for me... Only by forging ahead in this perilous world of mysticism can I protect those I care about... Jenna silently mused, taking the Loen gold pound. She inspected it and inquired, "How should I use it?"
"Simply keep it with you," Will advised, waving his hand before vanishing into the depths of the quarry cave, clutching his jack-o'-lantern.
Jenna stowed the lucky gold coin and made her way back to the surface. To her astonishment, she found that she couldn't recall the route she had taken.
While she had arrived guided by her spirituality, she was now fully awake and devoid of the same guidance.
Jenna had no choice but to navigate her way independently, following a general principle of "ascending."
After walking for some time, the ground suddenly shook violently, as if an explosion had occurred in the distance.
An earthquake or some other anomaly? Jenna furrowed her brow and quickened her pace to find a path leading upward.
As she turned a corner around a rock wall, her feet abruptly gave way.

The ground had already caved in, and now, it had completely collapsed.
Amidst the deafening sounds of collapse, Jenna couldn't react in time and tumbled deeper as the ground disintegrated.
She swiftly adjusted her body and activated her Assassin abilities, allowing her to descend gracefully like a feather.

Chapter 460: Chain Reaction

In the Deep Valley Quarry in the hill district, the gatekeeper "fell asleep" once more, carried away by two members of the Machinery Hivemind.

Clad in a white priest's robe and a clergyman's bonnet, Horamick Haydn gazed at the open mine entrance, his benevolent and gentle face veiled in shadows.

After the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery lost all its dioceses in the Loen Kingdom, the former Archbishop of Backlund, a member of the Divine Council, returned to the headquarters in Intis. Over the past few years, he had traveled to various places like a firefighter, handling various serious Beyonder incidents.

He understood better than most clergymen of the God of Steam and Machinery Church that, despite the outward appearance of peace, the world was riddled with festering wounds. Problems abounded, and hidden dangers lurked in the darkness. The orthodox Churches and government organizations could only strive to maintain stability.

Horamick collected his thoughts and sighed silently. He turned to the Machinery Hivemind deacon beside him and declared, "Let's take action. God will protect us. By steam!"

As he spoke, he drew a Triangular Sacred Emblem on his chest.

The burly Machinery Hivemind deacon issued the command for purification, and the members of the Hivemind sprang into action. Some raised iron-black barrel-shaped objects, while others shouldered weapons resembling steam firearms, devoid of backpacks or golden ammunition belts. Still, others produced leather scrolls, charms crafted from various metals, and some pointed rings, canes, and other objects forward.

Rumble!

The miniature sun-like golden fireball was the first to blast out of a cannon barrel, landing at the heart of the quarry cave.

Behind it followed a cascade of colorful "cannonballs" and bullets of varying shapes. The light and dispersed waves purged the entire Deep Valley Quarry repeatedly, maintaining the cave's structural integrity, resulting in only a slight collapse.

After a few rounds of purification, the concealed cave within the quarry was breached, unveiling its interior.

Horamick's eyes gleamed with an inhuman, dark-red light. He could clearly discern that the white mist within the secret cave had nearly dissipated entirely. Human arms and legs were embedded in the rock walls on either side.

The archbishop advanced, leading two squads of Machinery

Hivemind members through the quarry and into the concealed cave.
Before entering, he cast a glance back at the nearby Deep Valley Cloister, closely monitored by Trier's archbishop with Sealed Artifacts.
Horamick studied the human arms and legs attached to gears, crankshafts, and other mechanical components, resembling experimental subjects.
Under the deacon's orders, the Machinery Hivemind members initiated another round of purification. They persisted until the arms, legs, and machinery had turned to ashes or fragments, allowing them to proceed further into the secret cave and descend the tunnel.
After several iterations, Horamick and the Machinery Hivemind members, their pale-white hair concealed by clergyman bonnets, reached a vast, laboratory-like chamber.
Here, human arms intertwined with machinery, following ceiling tracks, perpetually gripping cabinets, sinks, long tables, and iron boxes, moving them toward the blazing fire at the deepest part of the hall.
A few human corpses were piled in the chamber, and a humanoid figure made entirely of machinery stood among them.
This mechanical being stood at a towering height of over three meters. One of his cybernetic eyes resembled an emerald, while the other resembled a ruby, supported by numerous components. His temples were encased in a transparent special material, revealing the squirming grayish-white brain within.
The mechanical giant cast a glance at Horamick and the others, who were scattered at the entrance of the chamber, and emitted a metallic chuckle.
"Surprised, are you? I don't require steam to power myself or a human body to control me. I can perform any task just like a normal person, including combat. Unfortunately, my Sequence isn't high enough to replace the human brain.
"Seeing this, you have no reason to doubt, right? We are the chosen children of God. We follow the true teachings of God, while your spirits and flesh have been tainted by the pleasures and indulgence of the mortal world, causing you to abandon the throne of God!"
Horamick surveyed the surroundings and noticed that the Machinery Hivemind members present remained extraordinarily vigilant and resolute. He nodded in approval.
Turning his attention to the mechanical giant, his benevolent expression remained undisturbed.

"You used a spirituality gem, didn't you?
"Using humans to refine spirituality gems is even more ruthless and wasteful than employing steam to drive them.
"Claude, I thought you were momentarily lost and would gradually return to your senses within the Deep Valley Cloister. I didn't anticipate that you would become a heretic!"
"Heretic?" The mechanical giant laughed. "You are the heretics! When was the last time any of you received a revelation?"
"All the time," Horamick responded with composure. "Claude, tell me, where is the Hostel? Are you in league with those evil gods to set your sights on Fourth Epoch Trier?"
In his mechanical giant form, Claude's eyes emitted red and green lights as he spoke with solemnity,
"You have strayed from the teachings of God. You no longer possess the spirit of sacrifice.
"The future of this world and the chance for a deity to ascend to the pinnacle lies within Fourth Epoch Trier. The sooner we unlock it, the greater our hope!"
Without waiting for Horamick's reply, the mechanical giant declared coldly, "I will show you who the heretics are and who the true followers of God are!"
As soon as Claude finished speaking, the light in his cybernetic eyes flared, and the entire chamber trembled. The sounds of machinery in operation resonated with an enigmatic aura.
In an instant, the Machinery Hivemind members, who had been on the verge of unleashing their firepower, witnessed projected paintings depicting the evolution of humans emerging from obscurity, advancing step by step, and building civilizations at various stages.
These paintings were ethereal, weighty, delicate, and magnificent. Horamick and his companions seemed to transform into the people within the paintings, experiencing the gravity and splendor of civilization.
At that moment, a face appeared "outside the painting."
This figure wore a towering crown, with his nostrils decayed to the point where only two black holes remained. His eyes were filled with countless overlapping star charts, and they stared greedily at Horamick and the others, as well as their civilization.
Silently, more faces pressed against the surface of the painting. Some had their heads bisected by a ruler, while others were adorned with yellow paper covered in strange symbols. Some were covered in ears of wheat and rice, while others barely took on human forms, their bodies adorned with various symbols.
These faces were larger than Horamick and his companions

combined. They stared fixedly at the scene through the painting.
The Machinery Hivemind members who beheld these faces experienced a profound fear from the depths of their hearts, as though their entire civilization would be obliterated.
Just as they were on the verge of losing control, the faces vanished mysteriously, just as they had appeared.
The scene before Horamick's eyes reverted to its normal state. The mechanical giant Claude and the frenziedly operating chamber reentered his field of vision.
The archbishop remained unruffled, though his voice resonated with anger.
"Heretics!"
As his voice reverberated, he flexed his left wrist with his right hand, unveiling a black, cold, and weighty metal tube.
The sound of gears clicking filled the chamber, illuminating it as brightly as daylight.
The Machinery Hivemind members launched their attacks in succession.
Rumble!
The Deep Valley Quarry experienced a distinct tremor, as though a brief, violent earthquake had struck.
...
In Underground Trier, just outside the stone door through which the Carbonari had disappeared, crimson fireballs hovered in the air, casting a warm glow in the dark tunnel.
Blazing Danitz, dressed in a linen shirt, a brown jacket, dark pants, and black leather boots, had one hand in his pocket as he fixed his gaze on the nearby stone door.
His burnt-yellow hair and eyebrows framed his face, and he casually held a weed in his mouth, surveying the surroundings with his dark-blue yet bright eyes.
Nearly 20 men, all dressed as sailors, silently fanned out in the vicinity. Some twirled daggers, others wiped the barrels of their revolvers, and a few stretched their necks in anticipation.
A grinning, brown-haired sailor finally broke the silence and questioned Blazing Danitz, "Captain, why are we aiding the Intis government in pursuing the Carbonari? And why are we doing it for free?"
Danitz glanced at him, spat out the weed from his mouth, and muttered under his breath, "Damn fools, do you want to see Trier in ruins? Are you lads not still Intisian?"
As he spoke, he swung his fist at the stone door.
Doesn't this group of assholes not know that their captain owns numerous properties in Trier?

Upon the surface of Danitz's clenched fist, blazing white flames gathered as he thrust forward. Eventually, they coalesced into a fireball emitting a destructive aura.

Boom!

The ground shook, and the stone door shattered.

...

Jenna descended gracefully in the seemingly endless darkness, occasionally brushing against gravel but escaping physical harm.

After what felt like an eternity of descent, her feet finally touched solid ground.

Her beautiful blue eyes reflected a building.

It was a slightly crooked beige house. The lower three floors bore the architectural marks of Roselle's era, featuring pillar walls, arches, and large windows. The top two floors, in stark contrast, seemed crudely appended as an afterthought.

This is... Jenna was visibly taken aback.

The building before her was one she recognized all too well.

It was Auberge du Coq Doré!

At that moment, light streamed from numerous rooms within Auberge du Coq Doré. Jenna spotted a man and a woman, standing on the third-floor balcony, wrapped in each other's embrace.

The man sported black-framed glasses, his neatly combed brown hair adding to his refined appearance. As for the woman, she wore a lake-blue dress, her plump face and ethereal brown eyes creating a curious juxtaposition.

Thud, thud. Jenna's heart raced.

She had never actually met the woman, but she was familiar with the man.

It was the missing playwright, Gabriel!

Chapter 461: Strange World

In Room 309, Gabriel casually surveyed the street diagonally across the way and suddenly spotted Jenna, who had disguised herself as a female mercenary.

He was taken aback for a moment before swiftly retreating from the window with Séraphine cradled in his arms.

Only then did Jenna, who appeared to be lost in a daydream, snap back to reality. Instinctively, she took two steps back and melted into the shadows cast by the building.

As her thoughts raced, chaos reigned in her mind.

Is that Gabriel?

I'm seeing him again... Didn't he morph into a monster and head to the Hostel?

Is this the Hostel? Auberge du Coq Doré is the Hostel?

No, the real Auberge du Coq Doré definitely isn't a Hostel. Otherwise, Ciel and the secret organization with tarot cards as their code names would have discovered it long ago...

Is this a mirror image of Auberge du Coq Doré, or is it the sketch of someone somewhere?

Jenna quickly deduced, relying on the information at hand.

Yet, upon further reflection, she sensed that something was off.

Auberge du Coq Doré used a naming system like Room 207 and 305. According to Bouvard's prophecy, Voisin Sanson was in Room 7, and Pualis de Roquefort was in Room 12. They didn't match up.

There must be something awry!

Jenna averted her gaze from the counterfeit Auberge du Coq Doré and surveyed her surroundings.

She noticed that this place was identical to Rue Anarchie. The buildings lined up perfectly, some tall, some short, some askew, and some precariously balanced, but all standing firm.

On the street, vendors peddled meatloaf, Whiskey Sours, and other wares. Pedestrians streamed in and out, creating a bustling scene.

If she hadn't spotted Gabriel and had been plummeting this entire time, Jenna would have believed she'd returned to the surface and Rue Anarchie.

As Jenna carefully observed the pedestrians and vendors, it became clear that something was off.

Their vacant expressions and infrequent changes gave them an eerie, mechanical quality. Many familiar faces seemed to vanish at the end of the street, only to reappear, circling around from somewhere and returning to the entrance of Rue Anarchie in a repetitive cycle.

It's indeed fake... like a massive stage production. Most people, like

the surrounding buildings, serve as a backdrop, but it's just a backdrop... Jenna analyzed the scene, drawing parallels with theatrical performances she knew well, trying to make sense of what she was witnessing.
Her attention then shifted to the counterfeit Auberge du Coq Doré and Room 207.
With the curtains drawn, it was impossible to determine if a mirror image of Lumian was inside.
After a few moments of contemplation, Jenna decided not to risk infiltrating the fake Auberge du Coq Doré. She opted to explore the area carefully, gaining a rough understanding of the overall situation to see if there was a way out.
Following the shadows along the street, she cautiously made her way toward Rue des Blouses Blanches.
The layout and situation here mirrored Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. Jenna barely needed to distinguish the path before returning to Rue des Blouses Blanches.
With every step, her sense of unease grew. She even began to question if her usual neighborhood was real.
Jenna couldn't help but look up at the sky from the shadows.
Blue sky, white clouds, the westering sun, and billowing smoke.
It all felt real, yet helped Jenna confirm that this wasn't the genuine market district.
She had descended into the underground in the middle of the night to search for Will. *Could she have been missing for twelve hours?*
From across 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Jenna surveyed Apartment 601.
Beside the glass window in the living room, she saw Franca, dressed in a blouse and holding a bottle of dark red wine in her hand. Her flaxen hair was tied in a ponytail.
Behind Franca, Jenna, dressed in a light-blue dress, busied herself with tidying up, occasionally disappearing from the window's view.
Jenna wasn't shocked, but her heart sank.
She and Franca were undeniably present!
Is this really the reflection of the market district?
Jenna closely observed Franca and confirmed that Franca still used her right hand, ruling out the possibility of her being a mirror person.
Likewise, in Apartment 601, both Franca and Jenna's vacant expressions persisted as they continued their lives following predetermined paths without any deviations.
While remaining hidden in the shadows, Jenna pondered the

location of the exit.
Lacking much experience, she sought inspiration from Lumian's accounts and the plays she had witnessed.
Should I head to the border and investigate the edge of this fake world?
Since this place faithfully replicates the market district, well, at least Rue Anarchie and Rue des Blouses Blanches, it resembles a reflection. *Could I find the exit by locating distinct places?*
The Church has always told us that we can seek refuge in the cathedral in times of danger or accidents... I wonder what Église Saint-Robert looks like here. Does it seek God's protection or adhere to the Black Sun? If it's truly the Black Sun, it's an entirely different realm...
Jenna decided to stealthily make her way to Avenue du Marché and observe the state of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Église Saint-Robert in this strange world.
She made sure not to expose herself to passersby, residents on both sides, or newsboys peddling their wares. Through the various shadows, she carefully and quietly turned onto Avenue du Marché.
After advancing a distance, Jenna's eyes suddenly froze.
She noticed something different.
There was no sign of Salle de Bal Brise on Avenue du Marché!
Where the khaki-colored building and the skull statue should have been, there was only impenetrable darkness. Even the sunlight from the sky couldn't pierce it.
In this dark black hole-like scene, bright red lines alternated between slowly materializing and being consumed by the surroundings. Their ultimate destination remained a mystery.
What's most peculiar about this place is Salle de Bal Brise? Ciel mentioned that there's something ancient and sinister beneath Salle de Bal Brise... Jenna stared into the darkness, sensing that this might be the heart of the problem.
Muttering to herself, Jenna contemplated, Will I be able to leave this strange world by walking into that darkness? But I have a hunch that not only does it not lead to safety, but it also represents danger. I can't enter rashly...
As these thoughts raced through Jenna's mind, she was suddenly jolted by a commotion.
Swiftly, she cast her gaze towards the other end of Avenue du Marché, where she spotted several indistinct figures hovering in the air, emitting a faint glow as they meticulously scrutinized every shadow and conceivable hiding spot for humans.
They clutched a stack of papers, which they compared to the pedestrians on the road.

Jenna's heart tightened as a thought crossed her mind.
Did the masters or guards of this world discover the collapsing tunnel above and suspect that outsiders had entered, prompting them to launch a thorough search?
Uncertain about the abilities of these blurry figures emitting a faint light, Jenna didn't dare risk assuming they couldn't spot her lurking in the shadows. Her only option was to swiftly retrace her steps and return to Rue des Blouses Blanches, planning to take a detour through an area that had already been inspected.
Yet, even on the other side of Rue des Blouses Blanches, faintly-lit figures were conducting inspections.
Jenna's heart raced, and amidst her unease, she had a sudden idea.
She slipped into a nearby building, scattered dust in an inconspicuous corner, and recited an incantation to become invisible.
With this newfound invisibility, she dashed along the street's shadows and infiltrated Apartment 601 before the floating figures could search 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
After patiently waiting for several moments, Jenna discreetly followed the imposter Jenna into the washroom.
Seizing the moment while the impostor was occupied with washing a piece of cloth, Jenna, still in her invisibility state, drew a dagger and executed an Assassin's Mighty Blow.
Her form materialized as her dagger found its mark in the impostor Jenna's back.
The fake Jenna's eyes bulged in shock, but Jenna swiftly covered her mouth and nose to stifle any outcry.
After a brief struggle, the imposter met her end.
Rather than withdrawing her dagger, Jenna chose to change into the fake Jenna's clothes. Her extensive experience with worn-out clothes helped her conceal the hole at the back.
She then concealed the impostor's body in the cupboard beneath the sink to prevent any blood from flowing.
With this done, Jenna wrangled up the cloth and mimicked the actions she had observed, maintaining the vacant expression.
Soon, a faint figure floated outside Apartment 601's window.
Jenna didn't look up, continuing to tidy the coffee table, which had already been devoid of miscellaneous items. She could sense two substantial gazes on her, accompanied by the sound of paper being flipped.
After an agonizing seven to eight seconds, the faint figures moved on to search the next apartment.
Jenna let out a relieved breath and proceeded to the washroom

with a measured pace.
After what had just transpired, she felt an urgency to seek help. She couldn't afford to wait any longer. Even the suspected exit seemed too dangerous to approach, and numerous figures emitting a faint light were "patrolling" the area.
While these figures didn't appear overly formidable, Jenna knew that engaging them would undoubtedly draw the attention of the administrators of this world.
If this place was indeed the Hostel, the previous residents, granted boons by evil gods, would pose a significant threat. This included Madame Night Pualis, who alternated between a demigod and a Sequence 5, or the true demigod, Circle Inhabitant Voisin Sanson.
Jenna hadn't reached out to the outside world for help from the beginning because she lacked the means to send a message without leaving this place. Now, she was left with no other choice but to attempt something.
I wonder if the telegraph office here can be of any use... It doesn't seem promising... Uh... perhaps I should offer a prayer to a deity and recite His honorific name in Hermes. I hope He can hear my plea...
Jenna's heart raced as she seized the opportunity to clean the cloth in the washroom. She outstretched her arms and began reciting the honorific name of the Eternal Blazing Sun.
"The mighty Eternal Blazing Sun, Inextinguishable Light, Embodiment of Order, God of Deeds..."
As the soft Hermes words reverberated, Jenna's surroundings remained unchanged.
She couldn't help but regret not having made up her mind after becoming a Witch and putting her faith in Mr. Fool. That way, she might have obtained The Fool's honorific name from Lumian. But now, it was too late to consider that option.
Phew... Jenna let out a sigh and retrieved the lucky gold coin from a hidden pocket in her light-blue dress.
She felt that her best option was to rely on luck for now. She wanted to see if luck alone could help her elicit a response without using a complete honorific name.
Holding the lucky gold coin, Jenna continued her prayer in Hermes, "Great Mr. Fool, please help me leave this place. Please protect Trier..."
...
In the market district, Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.
Lumian suddenly awoke, sensing a faint warmth in his left chest.

Chapter 462: Critical Interference

Lumian's heart skipped a beat as he bolted upright.

He quickly unbuttoned his shirt and glanced at his left chest, where he saw the bluish-black symbol that represented Mr. Fool's seal. It was a fusion of a portion of the Pupil-less Eye and a portion of the Contorted Lines.

What happened? Mr. Fool's seal has been activated... Did Termiboros attempt to escape? Lumian's thoughts raced. However, as he pondered, he began to sense that something was amiss.

Sunlight filtered through the drawn curtains, casting a semi-darkness over Room 207.

At first glance, there was nothing unusual, as if someone had overslept until the sun was high in the sky.

But Lumian was different. He reset his body and mental state every morning, waking up naturally at 6 a.m. It was already autumn, and Trier didn't see the first light until 7 a.m.

Lumian recalled an earthquake that had occurred not long ago, and he suspected that the official Beyonders might have taken action. However, after carefully listening to his surroundings and confirming the safety of the market district, he had gone back to sleep.

It was still late at night!

Either Termiboros has escaped, and I'm no longer affected by the Circle Inhabitant's power, or there's been an anomaly in the market district... Lumian shrank into a gentle crouch, leaning against the desk beside the bed. He cautiously raised a corner of the curtain.

What he saw was a familiar daily scene, but soon, Lumian noticed blurry figures floating in the air, emitting a faint, eerie glow.

These figures had different faces, but they all shared an unsettling stiffness, emptiness, coldness, and detachment. They bore a certain resemblance to the corrupted Bouvard's corpse and Gabriel, who had transformed into a monster. It was as if they could disappear into the crevices of space at any moment, gazing coldly and dispassionately at reality.

The monsters of the Hostel pathway have invaded Trier? But where are Trier's protective powers? This doesn't feel very strong; it's more like a product of corruption... He observed carefully and noticed that the street vendors and pedestrians also appeared somewhat empty, as if they too had been affected.

Combined with the anomaly in time and the westering sun, Lumian quickly surmised the situation.

I'm not in the real market district!

I've been drawn into a strange world suspected to be the Hostel. This is the reason why Mr. Fool's seal was activated!
Lumian released his right hand's grip, allowing the curtains to gently fall back against the wall, sealing off the interior from the exterior once more.
With a sense of purpose, he got out of bed and checked his belongings to ensure they were all intact.
Without wasting any time, Lumian set up the altar and erected a wall of spirituality, readying himself to perform ritualistic magic to seek Mr. Fool's assistance.
One by one, he used his spirituality to light the three candles and incinerate the herbal powder and essential oil. Stepping back twice, he began to solemnly recite The Fool's honorific name.
"The Fool that doesn't belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck.
"I implore you..."
As he spoke, a thin gray fog suddenly emanated from the wall of spirituality. The candle flames took on a bluish-black hue, casting a sinister and dark atmosphere over the entire altar.
Lumian's thoughts slowed down once more, and an uncomfortable sensation coursed through his flesh. It was as if an army of countless worms were wriggling beneath his skin.
Unlike previous interactions, he suddenly felt a strong sense of imminent danger. It was as though the gray fog harbored blatant and unusually overt malice directed at him.
This malevolence would briefly fade, only to surge back. It didn't fully dissipate, nor did it manifest into tangible reality.
The cycle of vanishing and resurfacing was akin to a monstrous entity in the water extending its tentacles to the shore, only to be pulled back into the deep sea by an unseen force.
Lumian struggled to complete the ritual, waiting in vain for the angel's protection or any revelations to come.
The influence of the gray fog intensified, leaving him with no choice but to prematurely end the ritual and extinguish the candle flames.
As the wall of spirituality disintegrated, Lumian's thoughts finally returned to their normal pace.
Sometimes malice, sometimes no issues... Is The Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings interfering with Mr. Fool's response?
He usually can't do it. Has He gathered enough strength to take a risk at a critical moment?
This implies that the situation has reached a critical turning point...

...
In Quartier Éraste, outside the Sacred Heart Cloister with its numerous golden steeples, the Major Arcana card holders, Magician—clad in a white knotted shirt and a beige dress—and the elegant and pristine Justice, stared at the magnificent building.
A golden retriever accompanied them, doing the same as well.
Rumble. The ground quaked, as if a brief earthquake had struck Trier.
Magician smiled and said, "It's beginning."
They understood that this commotion was likely stemming from the Deep Valley Cloister and the quarry. Their aim was to initiate a series of changes and set off a chain reaction, with the hope that Lady Moon, hidden within the Sacred Heart Cloister, would step out on her own and trigger their plan ahead of schedule.
By doing so, they could avoid forcefully entering the Sacred Heart Cloister and provoking the Eternal Blazing Sun Church. Their target was Lady Moon, the evil god's bestowed who nurtured a deity.
Assuming there were very few Angel-level heretics Blessed within the barrier, Lady Moon represented the Great Mother and the most potent power among all of Trier's heretics. It was highly likely that she was at the center of the problem. By controlling her, they could disregard the intricate web woven by fate and grasp the heart of the issue, possibly resolving it on the spot.
If Lady Moon didn't emerge, Magician intended to capitalize on the chaos in Trier, attempting to conceal the grand complex of buildings blessed by the Eternal Blazing Sun, and forcibly locate her target.
Justice nodded gently.
"In fact, I've always had a sense that something is amiss with Lady Moon. The problem may not be what we've suspected and might have lured us here.
"However, regardless of the situation, we have many dependable companions. Even if something occurs elsewhere, I believe they can handle it."
Magician concurred tersely.
"The two of us can't do everything. Believing in our companions is both hopeful and necessary."
At that moment, she suddenly turned her head and looked into the distance.
Justice asked calmly, "What's the matter?"
Magician frowned and replied, "The seal experienced a fluctuation... Mr. Fool has also sent a revelation, but I'm not certain if it's authentic..."

...
After tidying up the altar, Lumian was just about to settle down and consider the current situation and ways to contact the outside world when he heard two sets of footsteps approaching from upstairs.
Are they heading for Room 207? Had the dissolution of the wall of spirituality alerted someone here? Lumian surveyed the area, his fingers finding the gaps in the newspaper-covered wall as he climbed up to the ceiling.
Like a colossal spider, he relied on a Dancer's flexibility and a Hunter's physique to silently cling closely to the wall, waiting for the two people in the corridor to approach.
If they didn't spot anything unusual, he would consider it a successful deception and let them pass. If they sensed anything was amiss, he would strike without hesitation.
At that moment, Lumian felt a deep sense of gratitude for Auberge du Coq Doré's aged appearance. It was filled with damage and signs of repair. This was why he could grasp certain protrusions, secure his grip in certain crevices, and anchor his body safely to the ceiling.
In just over ten seconds, the door to Room 207 creaked open.
Lumian's eyes focused on Gabriel's hairline and forehead, as well as the black-framed glasses perched on the bridge of his nose.
Behind the playwright stood Séraphine, a model clad in a lake-blue dress, exuding an aura of detachment.
It's indeed the Hostel... Although Lumian couldn't fathom why he had inexplicably ended up at the Hostel, he still felt a surge of excitement despite his taut nerves.
From this point onward, as long as he could deceive Séraphine and the others, establish a connection with the outside world, and seek help, there was hope for resolving the problem!
Gabriel took two steps inside and halted. He scanned the room and said to Séraphine, "No issues here."
Séraphine tersely acknowledged his words and proceeded to inspect the other rooms.
Gabriel followed the model closely, making sure to close the door of Room 207 behind him.
After they ascended from the second floor, Lumian released his grip on the ceiling and gently landed on the floor.
He pulled up a chair, turned it around, and sat down, leaning back as he kept his gaze locked on the door.
After a few minutes, footsteps approached from the third floor.
Lumian remained motionless, unsurprised as he watched the wooden door gently open.

Gabriel's figure appeared.
"Why did you come in?" the playwright, now a monster with a slightly vacant expression, asked with a note of rational concern.
Lumian chuckled.
"I'd like to know that too."
Gabriel entered the room quietly, shutting the door behind him.
He was dressed in a white shirt, a dark jacket, black pants, and strapless leather shoes, his face showing signs of pain.
"Leave this place as soon as possible. I'm losing control. I don't know when I'll betray you. By the way, Jenna has also entered. I don't know where she's hiding."
Jenna is here too? Lumian raised his eyebrows and asked the most critical question, "How do I leave?"
Gabriel began to respond, but the door to Room 207 creaked open once more.
Only then did Lumian sense the intrusion and turned his gaze towards the door.
Séraphine stood there, with her plump face, naturally disheveled brown hair, and brown eyes exuding a unique ethereal aura.
Lumian didn't panic. He put on a calm demeanor and said, "You seem to know Gabriel so well."
Despite his outward composure, every muscle in his body tensed.
"He's not good at hiding his thoughts," Séraphine replied in an empty voice.
Communicable... Lumian suppressed his urge to use the Spell of Harrumph and sighed.
"I thought you had already become a pure monster."
Séraphine's lips formed a self-deprecating smile.
"The difference between me and them is that before I turned into a pure monster, I realized there was still someone who truly loved me."
Gabriel smiled.
Lumian sighed and inquired, "Is this the Hostel?"
"Yes," Gabriel confirmed before anyone else could.
Lumian glanced at the dimly lit corridor.
"But the room here isn't Room 7, Room 12. It's still Room 207, 309."
Séraphine gazed at Lumian, her expression becoming increasingly ethereal, and her voice even more illusory.
"Here, they call me: Room 12."

Chapter 463: Noncorresponding Details

Room 12... Lumian's gaze on Séraphine froze.

He had considered various possibilities, but he hadn't guessed what Room 12 signified.

Room 12 was where Madame Night Pualis de Roquefort, her husband, butler, lady's maid, and the children resided!

Almost simultaneously, Lumian recalled the oil painting he had seen at Trier's art center. The woman in the painting, modeled after Séraphine, was naked, her skin adorned with faces.

Were those faces the symbols of the room's occupants, or were they the manifestations of the Hostel itself? Lumian's pupils dilated as he fixed his gaze on Séraphine, prepared to activate the black mark on his body at any moment and use the Spell of Harrumph to block the exit of Room 12's occupants.

He was still haunted by the memories of Madame Pualis.

Séraphine tugged at her lake-blue dress, her plump face contorting with obvious pain.

"I can't influence how long the residents inside can sense the outside world..."

In other words, Madame Pualis hasn't discovered me yet... Lumian heaved a sigh of relief, but he didn't dare to be careless. *What if Séraphine's interference quickly failed?*

At that moment, Séraphine pulled down the collar of her dress, revealing a portion of her skin.

Lumian could clearly see the oil painting-like faces there. They were half-hidden and half-exposed, looking exceptionally terrifying.

This confirmed Lumian's guess and piqued his curiosity.

Why use a corrupted human model as a room in the Hostel? Why allow Madame Pualis, Voisin Sanson, and other powerful evil god-bestowed individuals to stay there? Couldn't they just move into this replica—the fake Auberge du Coq Doré?

Was this to interfere with divination, prophecy, and other mysticism methods employed during a search?

Why does it feel like a ritual? It's like a specific setup and requirement... As an Alms Monk with ample knowledge of ritualistic magic, Lumian sensed something sinister about this matter.

Seeing that Séraphine hadn't left, he seized the opportunity to inquire, "How many rooms does the Hostel have?"

"From Room 2 to Room 13," Séraphine replied in her ethereal voice.

"No Room 1?" Lumian asked immediately.

Gabriel answered for his lover. "There's supposed to be one, but

we've never seen it. Room 1 has never moved into the Hostel."
Mysterious Room 1... It's confirmed at the moment that there are 12 rooms, but there might be more than one evil god bestowed living in each room... Lumian realized that time was of the essence and quickly changed his line of questioning.
"How can I escape from here?"
"With the permission of the pixies or through the black hole on Avenue du Marché, but it's very dangerous. It might lead you to places you shouldn't be," Séraphine replied, her eyes shifting between emptiness and pain.
Avenue du Marché's black hole... Lumian inquired further, "How many pixies are there, and where can I find them?"
"Three," Gabriel responded. "They don't reside in this world and only visit occasionally. They typically allow the servants to maintain order here—they are the flying and glowing figures you see outside."
Three pixies... According to the Purifiers' information, the Sequence of a Pixie likely hasn't reached godhood. I can tentatively consider them equivalent to Sequence 5, but their unique states mean that unless they actively enter reality, some Saints might not even be able to attack them... I do have the potential to deal with the pixies when encountering them, especially if I could capture one to facilitate my escape... Lumian's thoughts raced as he asked further, "Do the pixies have a regular pattern of entering and exiting?"
"No..." Séraphine replied, her demeanor gradually fading as she shook her head slowly.
Lumian switched to another line of questioning, "Do you know where Jenna is hiding?"
"I don't know," Gabriel replied quickly. "The pixies' servants haven't located her either. They're uncertain if anyone has truly entered this place. The pixies must have ordered an investigation based on the changes in the outside world out of caution."
Before Lumian could ask another question, Séraphine's face twisted once again.
She turned and left Room 207, heading upstairs.
It was evident that her ability to influence the residents' perception of the outside world was quickly fading.
Gabriel's condition worsened as he slowly made his way to the corridor outside.
"Is there a boundary here?" Lumian inquired one last time.
Gabriel nodded, his eyes growing increasingly vacant.
"Only Avenue du Marché and the area around it are real.
"It's surrounded by a dark, deep void with a formless barrier."

Barrier... Lumian repeated this word in his heart, his expression unchanged as he watched Gabriel close the door for him and listened to his footsteps returning to the third floor.
The word "barrier" brought to mind something Madam Magician had mentioned before.
She had spoken of a barrier outside their world, preventing the invasion of alien evil gods.
Although Gabriel's description of the barrier might not be the same as Madam Magician's, Lumian couldn't ignore the possibility that these barriers were connected, especially given the evil god believers' grand plans.
Turning away from the door, Lumian realized that time was of the essence.
Séraphine and Gabriel's corruption would only worsen, rendering them increasingly out of control. Once fully mutated, they would no longer help Lumian and Jenna hide the truth, likely reporting it to the pixies.
There are two pressing issues at hand. First, how to contact the outside world or escape this place. Second, finding Jenna. Lumian focused and employed his Conspirer thinking abilities.
Regarding the first question, especially how to contact the outside world, he quickly brainstormed several potential solutions:
1. Fully activate the Blood Emperor's aura in his right hand to see if it could break through the barriers of this abnormal world, attracting the attention of the demigods in Trier.
2. Set up a boon-seeking ritual to bypass The Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings's interference and transmit information to Mr. Fool.
3. Test the spirit and flesh connection between himself and Mr. K's finger.
4. Attempt to summon Madam Magician's messenger.
5. Attempt to summon Madame Hela's messenger.
6. Recite the incantation used to enter the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's gathering—the Nation of the Evernight palace—to see if it could be of use in this situation without any prior request.
7. Find the fake Franca in this world and check if she possesses the ancient silver mirror they had obtained from underground to potentially use it to escape.
8. Create a commotion to attract one or two pixies and capture them.
9. ...
Before diving into any of his numerous plans, Lumian knew that locating Jenna was a top priority, as any of his actions could

potentially alert the pixies and draw their attention.
How should I find Jenna? He tried to put himself in Jenna's shoes, considering how she, an experienced Witch, would handle being in this strange world, suspected to be the Hostel's location.
Jenna must have also seen Gabriel, and she wouldn't take the risk of entering the fake Auberge du Coq Doré immediately.
She can become invisible and hide in the shadows. She usually has the patience to observe. It's not difficult for her to notice the peculiarities of pedestrians and vendors...
Under these circumstances, what should I do if I were her?
Yes, I'd search for the boundaries of this place... I'd see if cathedrals and other deity-protected buildings have been replicated. If they have, I'd investigate what's inside and whom they believe in... I'd identify the differences between this place and the real market district to find any clues for my escape... And my first task will be to confirm if there's a fake me.
The pixies' servants were conducting a search...
Lumian's thoughts gradually cleared. He returned to the desk, drew the curtains slightly, and peered outside.
Lumian waited until the ethereal pixie servants, blurry figures emitting a faint glow and wearing blank expressions, had finished their investigation and disappeared before he took out the silver Lie earring and placed it on his left ear.
Swiftly, he transformed into Madame Fels and descended to the first floor, as though inspecting every room.
Then, he became a vendor who didn't sell his wares nearby, passing by Madame Fels and leaving Auberge du Coq Doré.
This was his home territory. Even though it was a replica or a reflection, it didn't stop him from already knowing the environmental details and the common figures that often appeared in this area.
Lumian didn't hurry to Rue des Blouses Blanches. Instead, he circled Rue du Rossignol and entered his secure hideout.
As soon as he opened the door, his brow furrowed slightly.
There was only one trap at the door among the many he had set up—the simplest one.
Lumian's gaze then swept across the room, but he didn't see the ritualistic furs or the used cowhide and dog skin that were placed here in the real world.
It's not a strict correspondence... he muttered to himself.
The more he thought about it, the more he realized that this place resembled the real market district on the surface. In particular, in a room protected by traps, various details didn't correspond.
It's like an external observation and the re-creation of key rooms...

It's like... It's like... Lumian's pupils dilated as he had an epiphany. It's like painting!

...

Fake 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Apartment 601.

Jenna clutched the lucky coin and offered a brief prayer to Mr. Fool. A thin gray fog materialized before her eyes but then dissipated.

"It... it's actually working," Jenna stammered.

That lucky gold coin proved to be truly lucky enough!

Jenna didn't receive any revelations, so she had no choice but to persevere and maintain her guise as her counterfeit self. She diligently tidied up the room and wiped the coffee table.

Time in this world appeared to pass slowly, with the sun in the sky staying fixed in its position, unmoving.

Suddenly, Jenna heard the door open and instinctively turned her gaze in that direction. The fake Franca continued with her task, showing no reaction.

Jenna's eyes locked onto Lumian's golden-black hair. She immediately averted her gaze and assumed an expression of emptiness, not certain if Ciel was the real deal.

In the next instant, she heard a familiar, taunting voice.

"As expected, you're here. That's all you can think of."

Chapter 464: A World in a Painting?

The familiar mockery and lack of a blank expression confirmed to Jenna that Ciel was indeed real.

"Dammit! Can't you speak properly?" Jenna cursed, waving the cloth in her hand.

Lumian closed the door behind him and smiled.

"You're quite energetic. You're not crying from fear."

Jenna cautiously looked out the window, confirming that the faintly glowing figures had long disappeared.

Suppressing her urge to argue with Lumian, she wasted no time and asked, "How did you get in here too?"

As she spoke, she reminded herself, As an adult woman with rich life experiences and many setbacks, I shouldn't argue with such an immature minor at such a critical moment!

Lumian's gaze moved over to Franca, who was sipping red wine by the window. He settled onto the divan and leaned back comfortably.

"First, tell me how you got in."

To be honest, he didn't know why he had suddenly arrived in this strange place resembling Hostel.

Jenna remained standing by the coffee table, ready to assume a dummy appearance at any moment.

She then recounted how she had received a dream revelation, came underground to deliver the mission item, and acquired a lucky gold coin.

Lumian listened attentively without interruption. Finally, he chuckled.

"Now, I can answer your question.

"I was sent here by Mr. Fool to save you."

He roughly understood why he had appeared in Room 207 of the fake Auberge du Coq Doré after waking up.

"Did Mr. Fool really send you? I don't even know His—his full honorific name. Did my prayer succeed with just the lucky gold coin?" Jenna had her suspicions, but she still found it unbelievable.

"Of course it's true," Lumian replied sincerely.

What puzzled him was something else.

Why did Mr. Fool send him and not Madam Magician?

If it were Madam Magician who had been pulled into the Hostel, the problem would have been easily resolved!

This could be explained by the seal of The Fool on him, but Madam Magician was a Major Arcana card holder, a key member of the Tarot Club who could participate in a meeting before a god. Furthermore, she definitely possessed similar marks in the three

pathways of the divine controlled by The Fool. She could likely be "assigned remotely."
I'm afraid there's another reason I don't understand... Lumian pondered for a moment and focused on Jenna's description of the world, then asked for confirmation, "From the outside, the only difference between this place and reality is Salle de Bal Brise?"
Previously, Séraphine and Gabriel had only mentioned that there was a black hole on Avenue du Marché through which there was a chance of leaving, but it was also very dangerous. They hadn't specified its location. Although Lumian had a vague guess, he couldn't be sure until Jenna revealed her discovery.
"I've only explored a few nearby streets and less than one-fifth of Avenue du Marché," Jenna replied cautiously to prevent Ciel from making a misjudgment.
She then continued, "And inside, there are many differences. For example, here, the layout of the room, large pieces of furniture, and reality are the same. The other details are somewhat different.
"I suspect, I suspect..."
Lumian looked at Jenna and spoke before she could.
"A world in a painting."
"Yes, a world in a painting!" Jenna's hazy thoughts finally became clear.
Combined with the Painter Sequence and the paints and brushes she had found from the mutated monk, she believed that it was an oil painting that only copied some of the streets in the market district and possessed supernatural powers. It was called Hostel!
Jenna was both concerned and intrigued.
Drawing a painting seemed to create a world!
Lumian teased, "I'm glad you could also come to such a realization. It's no easy task. This painting world isn't considered advanced. The oil painting created by an angel of the Painter pathway might truly be a world with living beings inside."
Unlike the current one, there were many aspects with fakeness.
What was the purpose of such a relatively low-level painting?
Without waiting for Jenna's response, Lumian instructed her, "Check Franca's hidden pocket and see if there's a classic silver mirror."
"Why don't you search for it yourself? You know what that mirror looks like better than I do." Jenna suddenly chuckled. "Don't tell me you're shy?"
Lumian said nonchalantly, "If you're not here, I'll search for it on my own. But since I can instruct you, why should I tire myself out?"
Jenna gritted her teeth and wasted no time. She walked to the

window and rummaged through the fake Franca's various pockets. She quickly came to a conclusion.
"There are no ancient mirrors. Many of the hidden pockets weren't depicted."
Lumian nodded slowly and inwardly crossed out Plan 7.
He turned to Jenna and said, "Try Magic Mirror Divination and see if it works."
Jenna, experienced, knew that Lumian wanted to use this opportunity to confirm if the world in the painting was connected to the spirit world and determine if his "teleportation" could succeed or help them leave. Therefore, she took out a makeup mirror from her hidden pocket and prayed to one of the safer targets Franca had provided.
Before long, the preparations for Magic Mirror Divination were completed. The palm-sized mirror turned gray, but there was no aqueous light.
"It failed, but there's still something supernatural about it," Jenna said, puzzled.
With a subtle nod, Lumian replied, "It's likely that there's a fake spirit world here. If you activate Spirit Vision, you might be able to see a few remnant souls, but this isn't connected to the real spirit world, so you can't find the entity you're trying to inquire about."
In other words, he could "teleport" within the world within the painting, but he couldn't leave it.
Lumian reached into his pocket, retrieved Mr. K's finger, and flicked it in front of his eyes.
There was no reaction, nor was there any change.
"What's this?" Jenna was taken aback.
Ciel actually carried a blood-stained human finger with him!
"It's a mystical item. It can't contact the outside world," Lumian explained patronizingly.
Simultaneously, he sighed inwardly.
Mr. K's finger seemed impressive, but it could never be used to its full effect.
Most of the time, Lumian had no use for it. When he needed it, the environment was often special, preventing him from using its connection to the true form to summon Mr. K.
Jenna didn't press further. She pursed her lips and said, "So, what should we do next?"
She couldn't think of any other way to leave this place. She could only consider starting with the black hole in Salle de Bal Brise, the edge of the painting world, and the situation with the two fake cathedrals.
Lumian chuckled.

"No need to rush. I still have eight plans left.
"But before we try them, we need to make a trip to Avenue du Marché and observe the black hole at Salle de Bal Brise up close."
"Are you planning to leave from there?" Jenna asked with a frown. It seemed perilous.
Lumian stood up and walked towards Apartment 601's door. "It is my last resort, but it's also a necessary preparation. I don't want to try the other methods and fail, only to be discovered by the pixies and blocked by the tenants of the Hostel. When that happens, I won't even be able to approach Salle de Bal Brise even if I want to risk it."
Jenna looked out of the window again, only to see that the Sun was setting in the west, and the pixies' servants had yet to return. Only then did she quickly follow Lumian down the stairs.
On the way, she inquired, "Why did those heretics create such a painting world to hide the Hostel's residents?"
Lumian pondered for a moment and replied thoughtfully, "I believe this is a secondary purpose. Overall, it seems more like a ritual.
"Think about it. This place resembles a phony market district. The Salle de Bal Brise should be the only place left without any correspondence. And I've already told you that beneath the Salle de Bal Brise are old bones from the Fourth Epoch. It's connected to the secret of Église Saint-Robert's old cemetery. It's definitely not a coincidence that the world in the painting left it blank."
"I also think that's the key to the problem." Jenna instinctively wanted to prove that she wasn't stupid by having a similar guess.
As Lumian descended, he pondered and said, "When the abnormality truly occurs, will such a painting world temporarily replace some streets in the real market district? Will only Salle de Bal Brise remain intact?
"Who and what is this to confuse...
"In mysticism, this represents the application of the Law of Similarity. When the similarity reaches a certain level, acts on the counterfeits can be reflected in reality...
"Could they be using this method to unravel Salle de Bal Brise's underground secrets and uncover the old bones of the Fourth Epoch?
"No, it's probably not just for the old bones... Are they trying to open the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier?
"But it's not that simple. The entire sealing system hasn't been destroyed or weakened..."
Lumian gradually formed an idea, sensing that he was getting closer to the key plan of this disaster.
If he could ultimately grasp the truth, it would be an excellent

performance for a Conspirer's observational abilities.
Jenna nodded slightly, agreeing with Lumian's guess.
As they conversed about the fake 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, their gazes suddenly froze.
On the road diagonally opposite, a woman in a loose strapped white dress was staring at them!
The woman had a beautiful face, her slightly curly black hair cascading messily over her shoulders. Her blue eyes were rather vacant, and her entire person appeared detached yet real.
Lumian and Jenna had encountered similar auras and feelings in another person.
It was the human model, Séraphine, Room 12 of the Hostel!
Is this another room in the Hostel—another human model? *Why is she here?* It's as if she's waiting for Jenna and me. Lumian tensed up and instinctively reached out with his right hand to grab Jenna's shoulder.
Simultaneously, the beautiful woman's voice drifted with a smile.
"Fate predestined us to meet.
"Convergence always happens inadvertently."

Chapter 465: Circle

Convergence... Predetermined fate... *Could it be Room 7, Voisin Sanson, and his family?* As these thoughts raced through Lumian's mind, he activated the black mark on his right shoulder without hesitation.

Spirit World Traversal!

He and Jenna vanished, heading for the entrance of Auberge du Coq Doré. Lumian had never set foot on Avenue du Marché in the painting world, so he didn't have the coordinates for the spirit world there.

The spirit world in the painting realm still comprised dense layers of colors and countless transparent, strange figures. However, the seven bright and pure lights at the "top" appeared rather blurry, as if separated by many panes of mullioned glass.

Guided by his spirituality, Lumian pinpointed the corresponding coordinates at Auberge du Coq Doré's entrance and teleported there.

They swiftly departed the spirit world and found themselves on the street.

But what Lumian saw before them was the building at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, the very spot where they had just been.

They hadn't left the street onto Rue Anarchie; they had merely shifted seven to eight meters from one side of the road to the other.

Circle Inhabitant... Jenna and I are already ensnared in the Circle?

Lumian turned his head and wasn't surprised to see the beautiful woman suspected to be Hostel's Room 7, standing only a few meters away on the same side of the street as them.

"Voisin Sanson?" Lumian asked in a deep voice.

He temporarily abandoned the idea of teleportation, as their previous attempt had proven ineffective in escaping Rue des Blouses Blanches.

As Lumian spoke, Jenna discreetly retrieved a mirror, preparing to utilize black magic to maneuver around and launch an attack.

She sensed that, at such a tense and crucial moment, Ciel's inquiry, instead of initiating a series of attacks, might be an attempt to divert the enemy's attention and create an opportunity for her to deliver a fatal blow.

Although Lumian had mentioned that Voisin Sanson was a Sequence 4 Circle Inhabitant of the Inevitability pathway, a Saint bestowed with a boon, a true demigod, she believed that they had to make an attempt, despite the odds. So what if he had undergone a qualitative transformation in various aspects compared to Low-

to Mid-Sequence Beyonders that even a small team combined wouldn't be a match for him?
Upon hearing Lumian's question, the beautiful woman in a white dress revealed a fleeting and distant smile.
"Seems like you're well-informed..."
Before "she" could finish her sentence, Lumian took a step forward and harrumphed.
Two beams of white light shot out from his nostrils and landed on the woman suspected to be Room 7.
Although the Spell of Harrumph's power had increased following his advancement to Sequence 6, he didn't believe it would truly work on a Saint. At best, it might make her sway slightly.
Lumian opted for this approach instead of donning the Flog boxing gloves to target the various negative effects of a Contractee. As a Conspirer, he keenly noticed a crucial detail: he and Jenna were trapped in the "Circle," but Voisin Sanson hadn't left Room 7. He remained within the beautiful woman's body.
This clearly hindered his performance.
Therefore, he either had arrogance as a negative side effect of his contract ability, or he couldn't leave the Hostel's room for some reason.
Combined with his earlier hypothesis that the world in the painting and the situation in the Hostel were part of a ritual, Lumian was more inclined to believe the latter possibility.
In that case, even if my Spell of Harrumph can't affect you, can't it affect your room?
The human models, corrupted by the Painter pathway and adorned with special patterns, were equivalent to Mid-Sequence monsters!
As two beams of white light descended, the beautiful woman in the white dress fainted.
Almost simultaneously, Lumian and Jenna's vision blurred, and they felt slightly dizzy.
When they regained their senses, they found themselves back at the exit of 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, facing the beautiful woman in a white halter dress diagonally across from them.
The woman's lips curled up, but she didn't repeat her previous statement.
Circle Inhabitant!
Lumian realized that he and Jenna were truly trapped in a loop, and the successful attack on Room 7 triggered the loop's restart.
Moreover, he confirmed that Voisin Sanson and his family couldn't leave Room 7 until something concluded. They could only exert influence on the outside world through obstacles. Otherwise, they

would have opened the door and confronted Lumian with all their might. They sought to control the target with an Angel sealed in his body as efficiently as possible!
Even if Voisin Sanson had the negative side effect of arrogance, it was improbable for all three of his children to be the same!
Without hesitation, Lumian sank his consciousness into his right palm, revealing a few bright red scars.
An extraordinarily frenzied, violent, and high-and-mighty aura surged into the sky, as if it sought to dominate the land.
Alista Tudor!
Lumian activated the Blood Emperor's mark.
While this had no real impact in the physical world, it caused those around him to feel a slight fear, making them tremble. However, the response from the painting world exceeded Lumian's expectations.
The sky suddenly turned dark-red, and the westering sun appeared tinted with an iron hue as it swayed left and right.
Rue des Blouses Blanches and the entire world trembled as if struck by an earthquake.
The vendors and pedestrians on the street, as well as the residents and animals on both sides, blurred and distorted.
The beautiful woman in Room 7 of the Hostel was taken aback. She instinctively trembled and wanted to hug herself tightly.
An invisible force shrouding half of Rue des Blouses Blanches materialized, resembling transparent glass.
Suddenly, it shattered, revealing multiple cracks.
Seeing this, Lumian grabbed Jenna's shoulder and activated the black mark on his right shoulder once more.
This time, they swiftly passed through the local spirit world and arrived at Auberge du Coq Doré's entrance. They didn't return to the Circle.
The painting world existed between reality and fiction, and it was very sensitive to the aura of high-level figures, materializing the impact. As Lumian's thoughts raced, a distant rumble reached his ears.
It emanated from Avenue du Marché!
Lumian and Jenna exchanged glances as a term came to their minds: Salle de Bal Brise!
Has something happened to the black hole corresponding to Salle de Bal Brise?
Was it a subsequent change brought about by The Blood Emperor Alista Tudor's aura, or has the ritual officially begun, heralding the impending catastrophe? Lumian's thoughts raced as he raced towards Avenue du Marché.

Jenna's response was as swift as his, making the same decision.
...
Deep underground, in a hidden cave undetectable to the outside world.
The rock walls here had been meticulously modified, featuring two vertical beams and multiple horizontal beams, each marked with longitudinal gaps.
To anyone familiar with Trier's map, these formations would correspond strictly to a section of Avenue du Marché. Each rock wall was the equivalent of a side street, and each vertical gap represented an alley.
Adorning each rock wall were lifelike oil paintings, portraying buildings of various architectural styles, dark iron street lamps, pedestrians dressed as clerks, vendors selling an array of goods, and scenes from windows, all depicted with vivid and natural colors.
These scenes were almost identical to those on the corresponding streets.
On the eastern rock wall of Avenue du Marché, three men in white shirts with unbuttoned vests were using mural tools to craft a complex, bright red door at the spot corresponding to Salle de Bal Brise.
Their bodies were coated in paint, and their eyes displayed a peculiar detachment, as though they were gazing at a distant realm rather than a rock wall.
Each time they completed the bright red door on the rock wall, it mysteriously vanished after a fifth was completed. The three painters had no choice but to repeat their efforts in vain.
Suddenly, the mine trembled gently, and minuscule cracks that were almost imperceptible to the naked eye appeared on the rock wall adorned with various scenes.
The female painter in a blue beret and the male painter in red pants looked up at the depiction of Avenue du Marché on the rock wall.
In the next moment, they pressed their hands against the rock wall and vanished.
Two figures emerged within the massive oil painting. One was a woman donning a blue beret, and the other a man in red pants. They both wore white shirts and open beige vests.
The third painter, a man in his twenties, remained on the outside. He was clad in black pants with tassels, his brown hair disheveled, and a bit of stubble adorning his mouth.
The distant expression in his flaxen-colored eyes faded as he cautiously surveyed his surroundings.

Observing that the mine's tremors were limited to this area and that the anomaly in the painting hadn't extended, the young painter let out a sigh of relief. He redirected his gaze to the empty Salle de Bal Brise, seemingly contemplating whether to change his approach or wait for the right moment to try again.
At that precise moment, a skeletal palm suddenly extended from the rock wall and the ground.
It had a yellowish hue and a withered texture, with its surface covered in iron-colored rust, giving it an ancient appearance.
As soon as the skeletal palm appeared, it seized the young painter's ankle, aiming to drag him deep into the earth.
...
Late at night, 11 Rue des Fontaines, Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.
Franca's dream had been an odd one, with various bizarre scenes woven together into a nonsensical narrative.
Suddenly, she jolted awake and instinctively looked to her side.
Although the room was shrouded in darkness due to the heavy curtains blocking the crimson moonlight, it didn't hinder her from noticing that the spot under the velvet blanket beside her was empty; Gardner Martin was nowhere to be found.
Franca's pupils widened with a mixture of surprise and suspicion.
It wasn't that she was shocked by Gardner Martin's disappearance. There was nothing he could do that would truly surprise her. What caught her off guard was her failure to detect his departure.
Demonesses possessed formidable spiritual senses. It was impossible for someone sleeping beside them to slip out of bed and leave without their knowledge. Franca had only snapped out of her reverie when she felt the drop in temperature on the other side of the bed!
Franca swiftly got out of bed, dressed, and opened the bedroom door.
The corridor lay in darkness, and an eerie silence hung in the air.

Chapter 466: Encounter

Franca blended into the shadows and moved silently through the shadows, her eyes fixed on the crimson-lit corridor.

She even began to suspect that Ciel had failed to find her and had enlisted the help of Madam Magician to teleport Gardner Martin away. *How else could he have vanished without her noticing?*

The third floor of the grayish-white villa remained still. Franca listened closely, feeling like she was the only one left in the building. The butler, valet, maid, gardener, and chef seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

She cautiously approached the valet's room, extending her right palm and silently turning the handle.

Through her Dark Vision, Franca spotted two people lying on the bed, wrapped in each other's embrace and covered by a thin blanket.

Almost simultaneously, Franca's pupils dilated.

The two of them were headless, their necks nestled against each other, their wounds stained with blood.

Initially taken aback, Franca recalled Ciel's description of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's Supervisor Olson. She suspected that Gardner's valet and his lover had experienced a similar situation. Their heads had seemingly "come to life" and left their bodies.

Without further scrutiny, she quietly closed the door and blended into the dense shadows of the staircase.

Franca wanted to see if anyone else in the building had suffered a similar fate.

Upon descending to the first-floor hall, her eyes froze.

The armor and weapons that had been there were gone!

What a drastic change... F*ck, how did I not notice it at all? Franca, who had been confident in her abilities, experience, and reactions, couldn't help but waver.

In the next moment, the washroom door on the first floor swung open, and a lady's maid in an old nightgown emerged.

The lady's maid shook off the liquid in her hand and slowly made her way back to the servants' quarters, her head empty and her neck stained red.

Hidden in the shadows, Franca cast her gaze out the window. The two patrolling guards had also lost their heads, and the shadow reflected in the glass was like a magnified beer bottle.

Franca, having roughly confirmed the situation at 11 Rue des Fontaines, didn't hesitate and quickly sneaked out of the villa.

She planned to report this to Madam Judgment immediately and use the Primordial Demoness figurine to inform Browns Sauron

and Demoness of Black Clarice about the anomaly here.
The latter necessitated a ritual. Franca was concerned that attempting it in this abnormal building would trigger unnecessary changes and bring unpredictable danger, so she decided to escape the abnormal environment before taking the corresponding measures.
In the darkness of the night, the Demoness of Pleasure lurked in the shadows of an empty house. She exited the building from the side and circled the lawn ahead.
...
Beneath Trier, Blazing Danitz forcefully opened the stone door.
Behind them, they found a small mine, with three classical oil lamps embedded in the stone wall—one high, and two low.
In the center of the mine, a staircase descended into darkness. The bottom was hidden in shadow, appearing to have no end.
Danitz retracted his fist and turned his body, signaling the nearly 20 sailors following him to enter the mine and cooperate.
Among them were Hunters responsible for observing the environment and detecting hidden traps and subtle traces. Seers used coin tosses or crystal pendants to determine the direction and danger of pursuit. A Mid-Sequence Sailor was ready to assist his teammates and handle any mishaps...
With this coordination, Danitz's team swiftly made their way through the stairs and tunnel, and their vision suddenly brightened.
They found themselves in a caved-in quarry cave, scattered with straw mats, rags, pottery jars, and other items.
Danitz scanned the area and chuckled.
"It's been turned into a weapons cache... Not long ago, dozens of rebels lived here."
His gaze shifted to the end of the quarry cave, where a wide tunnel led to an unknown destination.
A sailor standing beside Danitz clicked his tongue and remarked, "There should be many similar military hideouts nearby. Are the main rebel forces led by the Carbonari all here?"
"I'm not blind. I can see!" Blazing Danitz cursed. "The question now is, where did they go? Is the chaos about to begin?"
...
In the market district, at Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 305,
Anthony Reid was awakened by the previous earthquake.
Ever since his escape that night, he had become sensitive to various movements, although not as fearful as when he heard gunshots.
Given the dangerous signals provided by the intelligence they had

discussed earlier, he couldn't fall asleep quickly.
Anthony Reid got out of bed and poured a glass of light beer to ease his anxiety.
After using Placate on himself, he intended to force himself to sleep a little longer.
At that moment, he heard pounding at the motel's entrance.
Who returns so late at night? It feels a little urgent... Anthony Reid listened intently, sensing that something was brewing in secret.
Before long, footsteps approached his door,
and Anthony Reid immediately opened it to peer into the dimly lit corridor.
He spotted an impatient man in a grayish-blue worker's uniform and cap.
This was an informant he had developed at the docks.
"What happened?" Anthony Reid asked in a calm and gentle voice.
Having been placated, the informant's anxiety dissipated, and he cautiously glanced around before lowering his voice.
"There will be a huge strike at the docks tomorrow. Rumor has it that weapons will be issued."
"Issued weapons..." Anthony Reid's mind instantly filled with images of barricades, incendiary bombs, smoke grenades, rifles, and two-wheeled carts symbolizing Trier's chaos.
In Trier, due to the strong resistance of the citizens and their adeptness at protests and battles, such occurrences weren't too unusual, happening every two or three years, sometimes even two or three times a year. The only difference was in their scale. However, considering the critical situation before a terrifying catastrophe, a massive strike suddenly distributing weapons led Anthony Reid to consider the possibility that it had been premeditated and was part of the impending catastrophe.
The information broker produced a Louis d'or and instructed the informant, "Your intel is very important. Find an excuse not to go to the docks tomorrow and hide at home."
Instinctively, the informant bit into the gleaming Louis d'or, bid Anthony Reid a cheerful farewell, and departed from Auberge du Coq Doré.
Anthony wasted no time and swiftly descended to the second floor, arriving at Lumian's room.
He knocked lightly on the wooden door of Room 207, but as the sound reverberated, there was no movement inside. It was so silent, as if no one had lived there for a long time.
Anthony Reid stopped and furrowed his brow.
...
In the painting world, the westering sun cast its illumination on

Rue Anarchie, keeping the sky bright.
Lumian and Jenna hurried past the broken gas street lamps, sprinting toward Avenue du Marché.
They were uncertain when Room 7, where Voisin Sanson's family resided, would discover their teleportation destination. Their goal was to reach the black hole representing Salle de Bal Brise before the other party could lock onto them again.
This way, even if their other plans failed or couldn't be completed in time, they still had a final option—to enter the black hole and try their luck to see where they would appear.
Thud! Thud! Thud! Lumian led Jenna forward, and Avenue du Marché came into view. He grabbed Jenna's shoulder and spewed crimson flames from his body, enveloping them both in a huge fireball.
The fireball sped forward with incredible velocity.
Lumian forcefully led Jenna across a distance of seven to eight meters towards the intersection of Rue Anarchie and Avenue du Marché.
During this process, Jenna, unlike Lumian, wasn't immune to the flames. Her hair and skin singed, but she didn't struggle violently. Instead, she shrank her body and created frost to resist the crimson flames, easing the pain.
In the blink of an eye, they reached the edge of Avenue du Marché.
From there, they had a clear view of Salle de Bal Brise in the distance and the pitch-black darkness.
This allowed Lumian to identify his destination without needing coordinates.
What he saw was where they'd arrive!
The black mark on his right shoulder emitted a dim light once more.
Spirit World Traversal!
In an instant, Lumian and Jenna appeared beside the darkness.
At that moment, a crystal-like wall materialized before them.
It extended upward, enclosing the entire Salle de Bal Brise like a transparent lid.
Lumian and Jenna subconsciously gazed up and saw two figures in the air.
One was a young woman wearing a blue beret, a tied-up white shirt, and dark pants. Her beige vest was open, and her body was covered in paint. Her orange hair was short, and her yellow eyes were deep and ethereal, as if hiding a world.
The other man, in his thirties, wore similar attire but with red pants for his lower body. He had gentle facial features, light eyebrows, and distant, ethereal blue eyes.

He still held a thick paintbrush in his hand, with a palette of mostly used paint.
Behind them, a pair of translucent dragonfly-like wings flapped gently, helping them hover in the air.
Painters? Those Pixies? Lumian and Jenna instantly speculated.
The man looked at Lumian with surprise and spoke in a voice that seemed to come from afar,
"Welcome back to the Hostel, Room 1."
Room 1... Lumian's eyes froze.
Room 1? Jenna couldn't help but turn to her companion in shock.

Chapter 467: Old Bones

Upon hearing the term "Room 1," Lumian was genuinely surprised, even with his wealth of experiences.

Séraphine and Gabriel had previously mentioned that the Hostel had a total of 13 "Rooms," but Room 1 had never been mentioned. It was as if it had never entered the Hostel. Lumian had always found this to be a mysterious omission, suspecting that there were critical points hidden in this fact. To his amazement, the painter-dressed man, likely a Pixie, now addressed him as "Room 1."

This was beyond belief!

Lumian was certain that the symbols on him were related to Mr. Fool and the entity known as Inevitability. They had nothing to do with the Painter. While Termiboros, an evil god's Angel, resided within him, it was fundamentally different from the Hostel Rooms like Séraphine's.

They had different sources of power and were different forms of abode!

At that moment, Lumian didn't waste time analyzing why the suspected Pixie called him Room 1 or whether there was important information hidden in it. He knew one thing—unless he could quickly eliminate or control the two enemies in midair and take command of the black hole in the Salle de Bal Brise area, the Hostel residents would undoubtedly notice the abnormality and rush their Rooms to the scene, making the situation more complicated.

Upon hearing "Room 1," Jenna was equally shocked, but she didn't question Lumian or waste time seeking answers. She retrieved the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty, made of obsidian, and plunged it into her chest, despite having used it only a few hours ago.

At this point, she cared little about the accumulation of mutations in her body.

Similarly, even if something was amiss with Ciel, she would have to wait until they escaped before inquiring about it.

As the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty pierced her chest, a dense black fog emanated from Jenna's back, forming a pair of colossal and rather illusory bat wings.

With a powerful flap, she lunged for the woman in the blue beret and the man in red pants.

Simultaneously, black flames gradually condensed in the Witch's palm.

The colossal bat wings extended from bottom to top, obscuring the Painters' line of sight.

The man in red pants swiftly turned his paintbrush around and

dipped it in silver paint, drawing a menacing lightning bolt on his clothes.
Silver-white lightning detached from the man's white shirt and struck Jenna's illusory membraned black wings, numbing her entire body with the crackling electrical energy. The dense black fog that had formed the bat wings was diminished by the lightning, and Jenna began to descend slowly as she lost control of her flight.
In that critical moment, Lumian's form materialized in midair right behind the painter in red pants.
Without the ability to fly or float, Lumian chose to "teleport."
Seeing Jenna use the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty to create Wings of Darkness and fly boldly towards the two presumed Pixies, Lumian understood that his companion was likely drawing the enemy's attention and creating an opportunity for him to swiftly attack one of their targets.
Witches rarely fought in such a manner.
"Ha!" Lumian exclaimed as a pale-yellow light, resembling a stream of air, shot forth from his mouth and struck the man in red pants.
Before the Painter, who had just drawn lightning, could react or even realize that Lumian had appeared behind him, he closed his eyes and lost consciousness.
Without suspension, he plummeted to the ground.
The woman in the blue beret remained composed. Figures emerged in her eyes, as if they held a world within them.
One of the figures traversed the boundaries of fiction and reality, moving from the realm of fantasy into the world within the painting.
Dressed in a light-blue dress with long, thick blond hair and serene light-blue eyes—Aurore!
It was Aurore!
Upon witnessing this, Lumian's resolve remained unwavering. His eyes burned with anger.
Are you worthy of imagining Aurore?
As he descended from the sky, crimson fireballs materialized around his body and were launched towards the woman in the blue beret.
The woman extended her right hand and pressed it into the void. Her entire being suddenly turned illusory, her expression vacant and cold.
Numerous fireballs landed on her, but they didn't detonate, as though there was nothing there.
They passed through her figure and exploded nearby.

At the same moment, the Painter in red pants landed before Jenna with a distinct cracking sound.
The excruciating pain brought him back from the unconscious state induced by Lumian's Spell of Harrumph. He instinctively opened his eyes.
Just as the woman in the blue beret dodged the explosion, she exited her peculiar state and flew toward Jenna, who was about to land.
In an instant, she collided with Jenna, sending starlight and sparks flying like meteors.
Crack!
Jenna's body shattered into fragments, transforming into mirror pieces that reflected the sunlight.
Her form reappeared beside the profound darkness within Salle de Bal Brise.
Lumian descended with a whoosh, his feet landing heavily on the ground, his body swaying.
At that very moment, the three of them, along with the woman in the blue beret, seemed to sense something. They turned their heads, casting their gazes towards the intersections leading into Avenue du Marché.
Women with detached dispositions, fleeting eyes, and indifferent expressions emerged from different directions. They were Room 12—Séraphine—and Room 7, which Lumian and Jenna had recently encountered.
Gabriel followed closely behind Séraphine, his gaze growing increasingly vacant, his face contorted with agony.
Jenna and Lumian felt a creeping unease, as if they were inexorably descending into an abyss.
Suddenly, a hand extended from the darkness within Salle de Bal Brise.
It was a hand devoid of flesh and skin, composed of withered, yellowed bones stained with rust.
...
In the enigmatic cave adorned with a colossal mural, the young painter altered his form and broke free from the skeletal palm's grasp.
He existed in a state between reality and the spirit world, untouchable by anyone and unable to touch anyone. His only capacity was to observe as the empty space on the rock wall and the ground intersected, turning dark and viscous, akin to a bottomless swamp.
At that moment, an incomplete skeleton, composed of dark-red stained bones and rust, emerged from the swamp.

The skeleton appeared to hail from ancient times. It extended its bony fingers into the oil painting on the rock wall, corresponding to the incomplete Salle de Bal Brise.
Beneath it, more yellowed skeletons crawled out from the depths of the swamp. Some bore shattered iron-colored armor, others carried rusty weapons, a few were missing a third of their bodies, and some were devoid of their heads...
...
In the market district, beneath Église Saint-Robert, within the Inquisition.
In his office, Angoulême de François, donned in a golden shirt, attentively observed his subordinates delivering intel one by one.
"A violent explosion in the direction of the Deep Valley Cloister..."
"Abnormal activity detected underground..."
"Saint Vièvе Cathedral has issued an order to maintain maximum vigilance tonight..."
"Someone at the docks is organizing a huge strike tomorrow morning and distributing weapons..."
"There are also people organizing a march at the factories to the south..."
The Purifiers had a vast network of informants, surpassing even the most prolific information brokers. The manifold reports concerning unusual events in various locations within the market district nearly made Angoulême lose control of his expression. His facial muscles twitched ever so slightly.
When it finally grew silent, and no more subordinates came in to report, Angoulême stood up, adjusted his collar, picked up a substantial dossier, and slammed it onto the table.
While doing so, the Purifier deacon cursed silently, Hidden Blade, do you want me dead?
Ever since Hidden Blade had informed him about Gardner Martin's collaboration with the Carbonari, the anomalies between the Carbonari and the Deep Valley Cloister, and the Hostel's situation, various irregularities had emerged from every corner, relentlessly testing his nerves.
Only a few hours had passed, but Angoulême felt as though a tempest was gathering.
Phew... Angoulême exhaled and compiled the gathered intel, Hidden Blade's reports, and the questions she had requested clarification on into a single document. He pinned it to the wall with a thumbtack, hoping to discern any patterns or overlooked details.
The Purifier deacon's gaze roved the room.
After some time, his eyes settled on one of the documents.

Hidden Blade had inquired about the secret of Église Saint-Robert's old cemetery but hadn't received an answer.
The old cemetery lay within the current Salle de Bal Brise.
Angoulême's heart stirred, and he resolved to seek answers to this question once more.
It was one of the few things he could undertake at the moment.
Blasted Hidden Blade, once this matter is resolved, if you don't leave the market district, I'll request a transfer! Angoulême inwardly cursed as he hurried into the telegraph room, angrily composing a telegram.
He intended to convey to the higher-ups that they shouldn't be overly strict about confidentiality classifications when it concerned intelligence.
The sooner he could figure out the details, the sooner he could unearth the truth and forestall impending catastrophe.
After a ten-minute wait, Angoulême received a response:
"The old cemetery of Église Saint-Robert is situated above a node for the sealing of Fourth Epoch Trier. In the past, there was a breach that led to the release of some Fourth Epoch deceased. Subsequently, it was reinforced, and the situation was contained.
"When the sealing system for the catacombs replaced such nodes, the old cemetery lost its significance and wasn't retained."

Chapter 468: Q&A Game

Église Saint-Robert's old cemetery had once served as Fourth Epoch Trier's node for the seal. However, leaks had occurred, allowing the ancient dead to crawl out... Angoulême carefully considered the information and felt that there might be hidden dangers lurking beneath Salle de Bal Brise.

He returned to the office and fixed his gaze on the piece of paper pinned to the wall.

The paper not only clearly detailed Hidden Blade's previous inquiry about the old cemetery's secret but also provided the circumstances under which she had made the inquiry.

This was all part of their investigation into the Sick Church case!

Their goal was to uncover the reasons behind the unusual quietness of Trier's heretics and their activities as though they had gone into hiding for some massive endeavor.

Hidden Blade suspects that the old cemetery's secret is somehow linked to the heretics' plans? They aim to use the former leakage point to bypass the seal and open the door to Fourth Epoch Trier?

Angoulême, with his experience, immediately connected the dots.

Entering the telegraph room, he informed the higher-ups of his theory and made a recommendation.

"Send one or two teams underground to investigate the original leakage point as soon as possible, preferably led by Saints."

After sending the telegram, Angoulême breathed a sigh of relief.

His next task was to assemble his team and coordinate with the police, military police, and army to prevent the protests from escalating into riots before dawn.

This process would inevitably lead to clashes with members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order and the Carbonari. Beyonders would also be involved.

Additionally, as 007, Angoulême needed to find an opportunity to contact Hidden Blade and share the secret of the old cemetery with her.

There was no more time for casual chats in the telegram group; he had to activate their prearranged practical approach.

...

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

"Ciel is missing too?" After informing Madam Judgment and Demoness of Black about Gardner Martin's abnormality, Franca returned to the market district, only to realize that Jenna, who should have been asleep in bed, had vanished. Before she could inspect the house, Anthony Reid, with his buzz cut, visited late at night and reported that Lumian had mysteriously vanished. There

were no signs of a fight at the scene.
"Yes," Anthony Reid was even more certain that something was amiss. It wasn't Lumian switching to a safe house for sleep.
"There are no signs of a struggle here either..." Franca walked to the guest bedroom door and looked at the lifted blanket.
She could tell that Jenna had taken her time before leaving. Not only had she removed her pajamas and changed into her female mercenary attire, but she hadn't messed up the bedroom.
Franca furrowed her brow, pondering the possible reasons.
Although she knew this was a serious matter, she still habitually complained inwardly, Why does it seem like my girlfriend ran off with my boyfriend...
Amidst her thoughts, she remembered that Jenna hadn't handed over the grayish-white cloth bag she had obtained from the cyborg monk to the strange boy, Will.
Franca immediately turned her gaze to the coffee table, recalling that it had originally been there.
Seeing the grayish-white cloth bag vanish, the Demoness of Pleasure heaved a sigh of relief.
Jenna must have been "notified" by the strange boy, Will, to deliver the mission item somewhere and collect the corresponding reward.
And why did Ciel disappear?
Could it be that Will's request was for Ciel to accompany her?
Yes, after all, he was invited by Ciel's Major Arcana card holder, Madam Magician...
"Doesn't seem like a terrible thing?" Anthony Reid keenly sensed Franca's change in state.
"So far, that's the case." Franca produced a palm-sized mirror. "I'll use Magic Mirror Divination to confirm."
She retrieved Jenna's pajamas and caressed the mirror with her free hand.
Simultaneously, she recited in Hermes, "Celia Bello's current location, Celia Bello's current location..."
Although the name "Jenna" could also be used for divination, as Jenna had been using this stage name for a long time, and most people around her called her that, Franca felt that it would be more accurate to use her real name at a time like this.
In the gas-lit living room of the apartment, the lights dimmed, and the environment became oppressive.
The mirror's surface emitted an aqueous light, as if it had sunk into the depths of a river.
However, Franca saw nothing. Snowflakes kept appearing in the mirror like noise.

The divination yielded no results... Franca frowned again.
Could it be because of the presence of the strange boy, Will?
However, after handing over the mission item and obtaining the lucky gold coin, Jenna should have separated from Will. They shouldn't have been together for more than five minutes. Theoretically, it can't be such a coincidence...
Franca was cautious. "We'll try again in five minutes."
Anthony Reid nodded gently and asked, "Do you need me to go to Auberge du Coq Doré and retrieve one of Ciel's clothes?"
"No need." Franca shook her head without hesitation.
That fellow bears Mr. Fool's seal and the aura of the Blood Emperor. It would be strange if I could gain anything from divination!
Time ticked by, and finally, five minutes passed. Franca used the simple Magic Mirror Divination to inquire about Jenna's location once again.
There was still no answer, and no scene appeared.
That's not right... Franca immediately switched to the complete Magic Mirror Divination form of praying to certain entities.
In the dark mirror, an aged voice echoed, accompanied by the sound of water.
"Celia Bello is in an undetectable location."
Undetectable... Franca began to feel that the problem might be more complicated and troublesome than she had guessed, so she asked, "Where is Lumian Lee now?"
Amidst the sound of water, the aged voice replied, "I can't see, I can't see..."
The voice gradually faded into confusion and disorder. Franca hastily ended Magic Mirror Divination.
She paced back and forth, feeling that she had to report this matter to Madam Judgment.
But before that... Franca clenched her teeth and said to Anthony Reid, "I want to use Magic Mirror Divination to pray to an unknown and hidden entity. The results of His divination are the most precise. Perhaps it can help us obtain an answer, but you have to swear to the God of Steam and Machinery not to divulge everything you hear later."
"No problem." Anthony, clad in military-green attire, gestured a Triangular Sacred Emblem on his chest.
After Anthony swore an oath to the deity he believed in, Franca didn't hesitate. She lit three candles in a ritualistic manner and extinguished the gas wall lamps in the room.
In the dim light, her right hand caressed the mirror's surface three times as she recited an honorific name in Hermes.

"Eyes that watch all living beings, the stigmata from the Primordial Land, the omniscient one who serves The Fool, the great Arrodes..."
The glass of the makeup mirror darkened, fluctuating and enshrouding at times, emitting aqueous light.
As a Psychiatrist, Anthony Reid suddenly felt a strong sense of unease, as if a pair of eyes had scanned him from top to bottom.
Franca finished her preparations and asked, "Where is my friend, Celia Bello, now?"
In the mirror, an aqueous light flickered, revealing an image:
It was a mine that was too blurry to see the details clearly.
Immediately after, the scene shifted, revealing a portion of Avenue du Marché.
Franca recognized it immediately as the Salle de Bal Brise area, but the building didn't exist. Instead, it was replaced by a dark and crystal-like barrier. Jenna, dressed in a light-blue dress, stood beside the barrier, her expression solemn as she observed an unrevealed part of the scene. Beside her was a figure suspected to be Lumian.
As expected, they're together... *Where is this place?* Just as these thoughts crossed Franca's mind, she saw a few lines of ancient Feysac words dripping with blood appear on the mirror.
"Based on the principle of reciprocity, it's my turn to ask a question."
"If you answer incorrectly or lie, you will be punished."
Franca closed her eyes, waiting for the question to be raised.
The blood-red letters formed another sentence: "Have you ever fantasized about doing Trieriens' favorite activity with Jenna?"
Thankfully... Franca breathed a sigh of relief.
The shame of this question depended on Jenna's presence. If she were present, Franca would rather slam her head against a wall. But now, there was only one Psychiatrist watching.
Is there a problem with telling a Psychiatrist that I have a psychological problem and like women, my good friend, so much so that I want to do that with her?
Franca couldn't help but blush, but she replied smoothly, "I did."
Anthony Reid, who was observing, wasn't surprised at all. As a Spectator, if he didn't discover Franca's abnormal feelings and thoughts about Jenna, it could only mean that he wasn't up to standard.
He hadn't expected Franca to be relatively calm and not ashamed.
Franca then asked the magic mirror, "Where is the Avenue du Marché where Jenna currently is?"
This time, there was no scene in the magic mirror. Instead, bright

red terms appeared: "A world in a painting."
A world in a painting... Painter, Pixie... Franca immediately made a connection and a guess.
On the mirror's surface, bloody words distorted and squirmed, forming new words:
"Based on the principle of reciprocity, it's my turn to ask a question."Have you ever fantasized about doing Trieriens' favorite activity with Lumian Lee?"
"..." Franca's face burned. She could feel the temperature rising.
I-I haven't... She subconsciously wanted to respond, but then she remembered the pain of being struck by lightning.
She gazed at the magic mirror, striving to forget that there was a Psychiatrist beside her. Her lips quivered as she replied, "I-I have. Sometimes, just occasionally! I can't control myself in my dreams!"
Anthony Reid didn't allow his gaze to shift to Franca's face, nor did he allow his expression to change. It was as if what he saw and heard was ordinary.
This was the basic professionalism of a Psychiatrist.
Franca hurriedly concluded Magic Mirror Divination and entered the master bedroom. She organized information on Lumian, Jenna's disappearance, and the Magic Mirror Divination's response into written information and reported it to Madam Judgment.
After completing this matter and returning to the living room, she was about to discuss the situation with Anthony Reid when she heard a rumbling sound from the northwest of Trier.
It was as if multiple cannons were firing.

Chapter 469: "Reinforcements"

Quartier Éraste, Trier's garrison encampment.

Under the dim moonlight, a significant number of soldiers poured out of various buildings. They organized into teams with remarkable precision, either firing cannons at the distant roadblocks or shouldering rifles as they advanced toward Avenue du Boulevard in coordinated squads.

Among them were combatants equipped with steam-powered backpacks and massive firearms, strategically positioning themselves on elevated vantage points and in concealed spots.

Inside a building within the camp, Albus, his hair appearing to be dyed red, sat confidently in an officer's chair, his legs casually crossed at the edge of the table before him.

In his field of vision, disembodied heads dangled by bloody spines, almost like they had extended tails.

These severed heads soared toward headless bodies clad in blue soldier coats adorned with golden threads. They aimed for the vacant necks, inserting their bloodstained spines with precision.

Crack! They completed their "integration" simultaneously, twisting left and right to acclimate themselves to their new hosts.

The freshly created soldiers promptly retrieved their weapons and charged out in an orderly formation, following mysterious directives.

Albus Medici clicked his tongue and remarked, "This is quite the reminiscent sight. Will this night turn into a bloodbath?"

...

Beyond the multitude of towering steeples and the golden-hued buildings, Magician and Justice were alerted by the distant rumble of cannons.

"An early uprising?" Magician, dressed in a crisp white collared shirt and a beige dress, gazed with starlight in her eyes, as if she had glimpsed through the veils of the spirit world and witnessed the turmoil at the military encampment.

Her prior astromancy predictions had suggested that the catastrophe was still some time away. However, when Jenna caught the cyborg monk and discovered their ties to the heretics and job of transporting paints and brushes, it was evident that destiny had shifted, setting the illusory gears into motion prematurely.

The catastrophe had begun without proper preparation.

Justice, garbed in a light-blue dress, listened to the booming cannons and responded with a composed tone, "Given the scale, it's clear that this won't topple Intis's current government. It can

only incite a certain degree of temporary chaos...
"Could there be strikes, protests, marches, riots, and other forms of civil unrest colliding?"
"These are the strengths of the Iron and Blood Cross Order and the Carbonari. Perhaps Gardner Martin and some of his associates went into hiding to spark the flames, but it appears their coordination isn't strong enough. Without effective collaboration, they can't establish a connection." Magician's gaze shifted toward the southeastern region, where Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, the market district, and Quartier du Jardin Botanique were situated.
Justice nodded in agreement and added, "This means that our efforts have yielded results. They were compelled to accelerate their plans. It's impressive they accomplished such a feat given these circumstances."
As soon as she finished speaking, the "doll" messenger, dressed in a light-gold gown, materialized from the void and handed the letter from Judgment to Magician.
"Good evening, Miss Justice. A good day to you," the messenger cheerfully greeted Justice.
She was a mysophobic, obsessive-compulsive creature from the spirit world with a penchant for beauty, and Miss Justice was the embodiment of her preferences.
On the other hand, her employer had many shortcomings that she found intolerable. Therefore, she often took on additional tasks herself. This, however, had built a strong bond of closeness and trust between them.
Magician unfolded the letter and quickly scanned its contents. Her expression underwent a subtle change.
"A world in a painting."
"Did Arrodes use the lucky gold coin and The Fool's seal on Lumian to gain a vague glimpse of the scenes within the painting world?
"Partial glimpses of Avenue du Marché..."
After murmuring to herself, Magician turned to Justice and said, "I have a rough understanding of what those heretics are after and why they are utilizing the Hostel's form and the essence of its rooms.
"We can't afford to waste any more time. Let's take action now. Control or eliminate Lady Moon before we search for the painting world."
Justice nodded. "Agreed."
She then smiled and added, "We should place our trust in our comrades and collaborators."
"Very well." Magician took a step toward the Sacred Heart Cloister,

her beige dress hem billowing in the breeze.
She raised her hands, and a constellation of resplendent stars materialized around her.
They appeared both distant and densely packed, converging to create a night sky over the highlands.
The countless stars cast their radiance upon the surface of the Sacred Heart Cloister.
With a determined effort, Magician lifted the void in front of her, as if bearing a heavy burden.
Amidst the tumultuous yet silent vibrations, the Sacred Heart Cloister, along with its myriad steeples and the ground beneath it, was "projected" into a pitch-black void. Fierce hurricanes and layers of darkness encircled them.
Almost simultaneously, brilliant sunbeams illuminated the interconnected buildings, as if conjuring thousands of miniature suns.
They resisted the encroaching darkness, striving to reveal the concealed void.
Magician and Justice vanished, reappearing in a space that seemed to bend and contract, forming a dark sphere.
Close by, a crouching golden retriever activated Psychological Invisibility, carefully observing her surroundings and maintaining the highest level of vigilance.
...
Painting world, Avenue du Marché.
From the darkness that corresponded to Salle de Bal Brise, dark-red and rust-stained yellow skeletons emerged.
They exuded a palpable aura of death, and the strong scent of rust and blood hung heavy in the air. When gathered together, they created and intensified a frenzied and violent atmosphere.
This sensation was tangible, immediately shaking the crystal barrier enveloping the darkness. It produced numerous cracks before silently collapsing.
Witnessing this horrifying scene, the woman in the white halter dress who had brought the Sansons to Avenue du Marché and the various rooms with similar auras to Séraphine's brought over, certain words spoken by the "doll" messenger flashed through Lumian's mind.
Those old bones!
With a swift thought, he seized Jenna's arm with his left hand and immersed his consciousness into his right palm.
Bright red scars reappeared, and an exceptionally violent, maddening, and domineering aura surged from his body, causing the blue sky, white clouds, and the setting sun to visibly quiver.

Even Séraphine and the other "rooms," despite their experience, were taken aback and couldn't help but shudder.
The two pixies outside were even more terrified, convinced that a formidable presence had descended and that the painting world was on the brink of collapse.
The yellowish, ragged, and incomplete old bones creaked and turned, bowing their heads in unison to Lumian. They refrained from instinctively attacking the nearest humans.
Lumian raised his chin slightly and pointed his right hand with an icy determination at the "rooms" and the two pixies.
The old bones, clad in tattered armor and brandishing rusty weapons, transformed into dangerous incandescent fireballs that exploded towards every genuine target.
The blue-beret-wearing pixie's pupils dilated, and she abruptly extended her palm into the void.
Her form turned ethereal once more, suffused with even greater emptiness and indifference, as if she had hidden herself in another realm.
Boom!
The white-hot fireball merged with her form, resulting in a powerful explosion, but it couldn't reach the distant fantasy world and harm its intended target.
The Painter, donned in red pants, had suffered a severe fall, with fractured bones and a lingering sense of dizziness. There was no time to change his condition. His only option was to attempt a rapid repositioning, employing the maximum speed a Sequence 8 could muster. Yet, just as he sprang to his feet, he was struck by a blazing white fireball.
Boom!
The Pixie was left in a gory state from the explosion. His abdomen was torn open, internal organs spilled out, and his left arm severed. Severe burn marks covered his body.
He lost consciousness, his life ebbing away.
The incandescent white fireball hurtling toward Séraphine and Gabriel suddenly veered into the wilderness, distancing itself from the indifferent and vacant human models by several hundred meters.
The farther it flew, the weaker it became. After enduring for a hundred to two hundred meters, it eventually touched the ground and exploded.
Perhaps the most dangerous factor was the woman in the white halter dress, with curly black hair and a beautiful face. She appeared soulless as multiple blazing white fireballs were aimed at her.

However, the hazardous fireballs either bypassed the raised palms of the human model or exploded prematurely in a strange manner. Some even ascended into the air and transmuted into fireworks.
It was akin to Room 7 being impervious to attack.
Not far from Séraphine, there stood a stunning woman in a bright red dress. Her eyes held a vacant quality, and her aura appeared somewhat detached.
At that moment, she watched a blazing white fireball hurtling toward her like a meteor, remaining utterly motionless.
The blazing white fireball grew fainter and smaller. Just as it was about to collide with its target, it completely extinguished and reverted to a yellowish skeleton holding a rusty spear.
The skeleton swayed a few times before disintegrating, the withering sensation becoming more pronounced.
In the café diagonally opposite, an elegant plump lady in a black dress materialized. On one hand, she seemed to have lost her vitality and appeared unusually ethereal. On the other hand, she displayed a yearning expression and gaze. She opened her mouth as the incandescent white fireball approached and raised her hands, clutching a silver knife and fork.
With a whoosh, she sliced the blazing white fireball in half.
An illusory vortex filled with fanged phantoms formed in her mouth, devouring a portion of the fireball, "neutralizing" the threat.
Boom!
Most of the fireballs lost their course and veered off, shattering the café's glass and toppling tables, chairs, and nearby outer walls.
Beside the darkness of Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian watched the old bones transform into blazing white fireballs, attacking the various "rooms" and the two pixies. He didn't wait to see the final outcome or seize an opportunity to launch a surprise attack. He grabbed Jenna's arm, kicked with his right foot, and lunged towards Salle de Bal Brise's original location, where the old bones had emerged.

Chapter 470: Three Heads, Six Arms

Lumian and Jenna plunged into the darkness, the area that should have been Salle de Bal Brise before the Hostel's "rooms" and the blue-beretted pixie could escape the entanglement of old bones.

His vision plunged into darkness before specks of spiritual light emerged ahead.

They converged like resplendent stars, turning densely packed, akin to a black velvet curtain adorned with diamonds or countless grains of sand in water.

Amidst these spiritual lights, an ancient, heavy, illusory, and mysterious door materialized in distortion.

Iron-black, its surface marred by dark-red rust, as if a large amount of blood had spilled upon it.

...

In Underground Trier, within the undetectable mine.

In his untouchable state, the Painter witnessed yellowed skeletons clamoring into the colossal oil painting on the rock wall. Iron-black and dark-red lines outlined themselves in the previously empty Salle de Bal Brise, forming a door that shouldn't exist in reality.

"It's not time yet, not time yet..." The Painter, with tassels adorning his trouser legs, stared blankly, unable to believe such a development.

Though he and his accomplices had been attempting to depict this imaginary door, they knew it was destined to fail. At most, they would complete a fifth of it before having to start anew. They persisted for the experience, anticipating that once the ritual commenced, they could draw the crucial parts swiftly.

Having already finished the main part of the Hostel oil painting, they had nothing else to do. *Why not try a few more times? What if a miracle occurred?*

Now, a miracle unfolded without their attempts!

The Painter gazed at the transformation before him, a mix of anticipation and shock.

He couldn't help but look up at the cave ceiling and silently mutter, Do we not need cooperation from aboveground to make the entrance appear?

Could the abnormality in the painting world be causing this?

If we don't coordinate with the surface in time, even if the entrance appears, we won't be able to bypass the seal and enter...

...

Lumian and Jenna descended as if through a dark pipe, uncontrollably approaching the void adorned with spiritual specks

of light and the bloodied, rusted door.
Almost simultaneously, Lumian's left chest heated up, and terrifying ravings echoed in his ears from an infinite height and distance.
Familiar with this sensation, indicating the corruption of Inevitability in his body, Lumian knew Termiboros was up to something, and Mr. Fool's seal had been triggered.
However, unlike before, Lumian refrained from attempting to crack the seal to steal Inevitability's power. Consequently, he didn't enter a state of excruciating pain, just a bit dazed.
In his daze, Lumian saw Séraphine—Room 7—clad in a white halter dress. Other "rooms" with varied appearances and attire, yet nearly identical dispositions,
seemed to detach from the painting world and overlap with the fake Avenue du Marché.
The left chests of these "rooms" emitted a faint glow, suggesting they too had seals on them.
Lumian's head spun as a scene—whether real or fake—unfolded before him.
Séraphine and the other 12 "rooms" stepped into the void and surrounded him, invisible and hidden connections intertwining.
Jenna, arm clutched by Lumian, sensed something and turned her head.
Flesh on Lumian's left and right shoulders writhed as two illusory heads emerged.
One head looked like a ten-year-old Lumian, covered in dirt, and his eyes filled with ruthlessness. The other, nearly thirty, with blood-red hair and iron-black eyes, looked violent and crazy.
Wh— Jenna felt as if she had entered a nightmare, witnessing her companion transform into a monster.
Lumian's body expanded, gripping Jenna like a palm-sized puppet.
Behind him, illusory arms sprouted from his ribs.
Lumian didn't neglect the changes in his body. He saw his current form in Jenna's eyes.
A three-headed, six-armed giant!
It bore a striking resemblance to the monster in Cordu's ruins!
However, Lumian didn't lose his mind. He was certain The Fool's seal on his chest and Termiboros were still intact.
An illusory collision reverberated as Lumian crashed into the ancient, heavy, and mysterious door, causing it to tremble and creak. It was about to open.
At that moment, the spiritual spots on the black velvet curtain lit up, stabilizing the iron-black door stained with blood and rust.
Witnessing and experiencing this, Lumian suddenly grasped what

Hostel was, why they referred to him as Room 1, and the heretics' intentions and plans.
The concept of Hostel likely emerged after the Tree of Shadow disaster.
At some point, Maipú Meyer, ostracized, established contact with other cults, informing them of Lumian's existence and state.
They imitated the situation where an evil god's Blessed was sealed within Lumian's body, creating Hostel, Rooms 2 to 13. They invited various evil gods' Blessed to take up residence, establishing a mystical connection among them based on this systematic similarity.
When Lumian entered the painting world, actions taken on the other "rooms" of Hostel were equivalent to acts on Lumian.
When the Hostel took shape and all the "rooms" were pieced together, Lumian couldn't help but be affected.
Since the "rooms" displayed the levels of their residents, Lumian underwent a corresponding change.
The resident within him was an Angel, Termiboros!
After the mysticism-based Hostel ritual, Lumian, lacking the strength of an Angel or a true Mythical Creature form, had briefly attained the level of an Angel!
This explained why Voisin Sanson and company didn't leave the room and attacked Lumian directly.
Termiboros was sealed, so they naturally wanted Him too. They had to maintain this state until the ritual ended!
Of course, the heretics weren't kind enough to help Lumian experience the state of an Inevitability Angel. Their goal was to use this opportunity to enter Fourth Epoch Trier.
Opening the door using an Angel's level!
Hence, the Hostel had to align with some areas of the market district and exhibit environmental similarities.
Lumian speculated that the Salle de Bal Brise's underground corresponded to a weak spot in the seal. In the past, there had even been problems. Many old bones, guided by Alista Tudor's aura, had crawled out. The corruption leaked, affecting 13 Avenue du Marché.
This made Lumian wonder if his arrival in the market district and his stay at Auberge du Coq Doré had something to do with the attraction the underground area had on Hunters.
Due to this crucial information, the Salle de Bal Brise in the painting world remained blank and dark. The streets surrounding it and the people who often appeared nearby were replicated in appearance.
When the corresponding ritual truly commenced, the surface's market district and the underground market district would likely

undergo a switch. Reality would become a fabrication, and fabrication would become reality, revealing or outlining the seal corresponding to Salle de Bal Brise, weakening it to the extreme.
When the time came, Lumian, an Angel, could "open" the door to Fourth Epoch Trier!
Maipú Meyer's return to the market district aimed to harness his Actor abilities, acting as different individuals. He would enter various houses and assist Pixies in grasping the specifics of these streets to complete the massive painting of Hostel.
Worried that Lumian, Franca, and others would notice in advance, he avoided their rooms, lacking sufficient knowledge.
Looking at the mysterious door beneath him, Lumian tried to distance himself, but he couldn't break free. It was as if a huge magnet was sucking him—now an Angel—behind the door, causing him to involuntarily squeeze inside.
Thanks to countless spots of spirituality in the surrounding darkness, the ancient door, stained with blood and rust, didn't open.
Lumian sensed that this was because the Hostel ritual hadn't fully commenced.
He and Jenna had barged into the painting world ahead of time, disrupting the heretics' arrangements!
Now, if the Hostel ritual was to be completed and the surface and underground switched, there were at least two key points that couldn't be matched.
Firstly, the subterranean seal, which could only be released by destroying Trier and eliminating most of the people here, now had the switch between reality and fabrication, a temporary acquisition of an angelic level, and the discovery of weakness in the seal; thus, the requirement could be significantly reduced. However, lowering the requirement further would necessitate a riot bringing chaos to the surface Trier.
Secondly, it was afternoon in the painting world, and the Sun was only westering. The sky was still bright, but in reality, it was the middle of the night. The moonlight was dim, and the darkness was dense.
...
Avenue du Marché, market district.
In a double-breasted brown coat, Angoulême de François noted the secret of Église Saint-Robert's old cemetery on paper, placing it in the safe house provided by Hidden Blade, hoping she would discover it in time.
The Purifier deacon guided his robot toward Imre and Valentine, who awaited near Salle de Bal Brise.

At that moment, the rumbling salvos reached his ears.
Instinctively, he turned his head to see Trier's sky illuminated by flames.
An army rebellion? Angoulême furrowed his brow.
Now, most Purifiers from the dioceses were dispersed to quell strikes, marches, and protests after daybreak.
Unexpectedly, trouble arose in the military camp!
Was news of the massive strike deliberately sent to us, forcing a dispersion of forces and making it impossible for us to organize manpower to resolve the problem in a short period of time? A conspiracy by the Iron and Blood Cross Order? Angoulême instantly had a suspicion.
...
In Quartier Éraste, a wilderness emerged from the Sacred Heart Cloister that had been thrown into turbulence and darkness.
Lady Moon's voice resonated, her smile evident as she addressed Magician and Justice,"You might not have guessed who's sheltering us this time..."
Before she could finish, the sound of a baby crying echoed.
"Waaa!"
The baby's cries were vibrant, bringing forth endless golden sunlight.
The entire Sacred Heart Cloister transformed into a blazing sun, piercing through the turbulent storm and distorting space.
In the real Trier, the still-sleeping citizens were jolted awake by the sunlight.
In Apartment 601, Franca and Anthony Reid instinctively looked up at the suddenly bright sky.
A dazzling golden sun hung in the sky, positioned to the west.

Chapter 471: Topsy-Turvy

Angoulême, racing towards Église Saint-Robert with Imre and Valentine to gather more intel and receive the latest orders, suddenly found himself blinded by sunlight. It was as though he had been shrouded in darkness for too long, struggling to adapt to the sudden brightness.

After a few moments, he and his teammates gazed skyward.

In Trier, where it had been late at night, the scene had transformed into a sunny afternoon!

Feeling the warmth of the sun, Angoulême couldn't shake off the chill crawling down his spine. He sensed that the problem had escalated dramatically, and a catastrophe loomed on the horizon.

In the blink of an eye, a series of explosions echoed from the Rist Docks, Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Suhit's steam locomotive station, and the nearby depot and warehouses.

Thunderous rumbles echoed through the air. Even from a distance, Angoulême and his comrades witnessed the crimson flames and burning structures. Gunshots, salvos, and shouts pierced through the chaos.

The entire market district plunged into anarchy.

Is Quartier Éraste's military rebellion thinning Trier's Beyonder forces to support the insurrection in the market district? This can't be the same group responsible for the earlier docks and factory strikes at dawn... *What is happening?* Angoulême's expression hardened as he changed course, hastening towards the epicenter of the most intense explosions.

Imre and Valentine followed closely behind.

...

In Salle de Bal Brise, the café on the second floor,

Gardner Martin donned his silver-white full-body armor and positioned himself by the window. A smirk played on his lips as he observed Angoulême de François and his team departing the area.

The leader of the Savoie Mob could already envision the chaos unfolding at the Rist Docks, Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, and other key locations.

Without reservation, he unveiled the hidden might of the Iron and Blood Cross Order in the market district, aiming to sow maximum chaos in the shortest time possible.

Whether it was "Blood Palm" Black overseeing Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Vincent Lorraine at the Rist Docks, Parsifal managing the depot, or Faustino, the infiltrator at Suhit's steam locomotive station, each was leading a team in acts of arson, detonating explosives, and unleashing indiscriminate destruction

and carnage.
"Fortunately, we were well-prepared. Even if we had to expedite our plans, we can still complete the corresponding ritual," Gardner Martin remarked to Supervisor Olson, standing not far behind him.
Olson, resembling a starving bear, clutched his small brown suitcase, his voice indifferent as he inquired, "You didn't eliminate the Demoness?"
Gardner Martin grinned.
"No need to waste effort on such a foolish Demoness. She poses no real threat. Moreover, taking her down would be time-consuming, and you're aware of their formidable survivability. It might cause us to miss the crucial moment.
"As for the others causing trouble, I dispatched Albus to the military camp in Quartier Éraste. Lumian..."
At the mention of Lumian, Gardner Martin's smile broadened.
He lifted the visor of his helmet, peering out the window once more.
Under the brilliant sunlight, the flames of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman painted the sky crimson. Shouts, cries, gunshots, and explosions reverberated through the air.
Gardner Martin tilted his chin upward, closed his eyes, and contentedly awaited the unfolding climax of the play.
The ritual was on the brink of completion.
...
In the painting world, the westering sun in the sky assumed a heightened realism, its glow merging with the faint shadow in an uncanny dance.
Similar transformations unfolded across every structure. Vendors and pedestrians on the streets ceased to be lifeless figures, now frantically darting about in pandemonium, desperately seeking refuge.
The subterranean market district and its surface counterpart gradually transitioned into tangible existence. One was now bathed in flames like an oil painting, and the two began to mirror each other, interweaving as "projections" in the spirit world.
Suddenly, like illusory objects flipping upside down, the painted market district emerged on the surface, severing its complete seal with the rest of Trier. The authentic market district had transformed into a mural within the cave, linked to the underground.
In the actual Trier, Salle de Bal Brise existed in darkness, mitigating the effects of the seal.
Within that darkness, the three-headed, six-armed giant, Lumian,

adhered to the enigmatic door. With a resonant creak, it slowly swung open, stained with blood and red rust, revealing a crevice seemingly ablaze with invisible flames.
Rumble!
Trier shuddered in its entirety, and the sunlit sky descended into a twilight adorned with fiery clouds.
...
Quartier Éraste, Red Swan Castle.
Count Poufer, roused from his slumber, snapped awake in the midst of a dream.
Blood-stained sunlight filtered through the thick curtains, accompanied by cruel and frenzied screams.
The beige castle, adorned with ancient bloodstains, trembled violently, as if a colossal entity beneath the ground clung to its foundations.
Poufer felt a summoning and a magnetic pull from the depths of his soul. Excitement painted his expression as he hastily vacated his bed and dashed out of the bedroom.
In his frantic haste, he disregarded slippers and eschewed a change from his dark-red cotton robe. Barefoot, he sprinted down the corridor, the hem of his robe swinging behind him.
How many nights had he yearned for this awakening?
It signified the long-awaited recognition from the remnant spirit of his ancestor, the fulfillment of the prophecy by the mysterious leader of the Secret Order, and the dawn of hope for the Sauron family to reclaim their strength. It meant the end of the curse that haunted the other Saurons and the promise of rebirth!
Count Poufer understood the potential consequences for himself, but he faced the situation without flinching or hesitation.
Hadn't every member of the Sauron family, choosing to reside in Red Swan Castle and not relocating after reaching adulthood, been mentally prepared for this moment?
To become the vessel for their ancestor's resurrection, to merge with Him, was an honor for every Sauron family member!
Descending the stairs, Count Poufer entered the underground maze.
In the darkness behind him, a figure emerged from the vicinity adjacent to the stairs.
It was Elros, donned in beige hunting attire with her long auburn hair tied into a ponytail.
The girl, bearing both the Sauron and Einhorn bloodlines, followed her cousin at a steady pace, her presence silent yet profound.
...
In Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, in the market

district.
Franca and Anthony Reid found themselves momentarily bewildered as they witnessed the sun appearing and hanging low in the west.
It's past 2 a.m. *What sun could there be?*
What was going on?
Why was this strange phenomenon happening?
Their thoughts were abruptly shattered by the reverberations of explosions and gunshots in the market district. Anthony visibly trembled, instinctively attempting to dodge the unforeseen onslaught.
Fortunately, having chosen to remain in Trier earlier, he managed to regain control more effectively than in past episodes.
A shared glance exchanged between Franca and Anthony revealed surprise, confusion, and underlying worry.
"Has the catastrophe struck?" Anthony Reid queried in a deep, resonant voice.
Franca, brow furrowed, mused, "But according to Bouvard's corpse's prophecy, the catastrophe was accompanied by rain and water, and now..."
Before she could complete her sentence, her spirituality alerted her to something outside the window.
An unmistakable phantom materialized in the building opposite, the two figures overlapping and swiftly parting ways.
Simultaneously, a wave of dizziness enveloped Franca, as if she had plunged weightlessly and failed to utilize an Assassin's Feather Fall.
Anthony Reid experienced a similar sensation. He spoke solemnly,
"Indiscriminately affecting everyone?
"The effect of a ritual?"
A ritual to trigger the catastrophe?
Just as Franca considered suggesting leaving the apartment to approach The Fool's cathedral at the Lavigny Docks for a clearer understanding, her attention was drawn to the abrupt changes in two items tucked within her hidden pockets.
She quickly made a judgment based on the locations they were located.
One was the palm-sized Primordial Demoness figurine, which, even through clothing, exuded an abnormal coldness.
The other was the ancient silver mirror from the underground, an object connected to a peculiar mirror world. It trembled subtly, as if stirred or resonating with the current environment and nearby objects.
Wh— Franca's eyes narrowed.

Coupled with the simultaneous movements of the two items, she suspected the presence of a high-level Beyonder of the Demoness pathway nearby!

...

In the Sacred Heart cloister, now transformed into a sun, the continuous cries of an infant filled the air.

The cries unsettled Madam Magician with a starlit visage, causing a multitude of door-shaped insects to crawl in and out. Miss Justice, her skin covered in grayish-white scales, was compelled to Placate herself.

The piercing sunlight forced the two Major Arcana card holders to instinctively shut their eyes. Before them, voids intersected, and layers of starlight blocked the spreading flames "into the distance."

They recognized the incoming force all too well.

It was the divine power of the Eternal Blazing Sun!

Although this true god hadn't physically descended from the spirit world into reality, Lady Moon, who had nurtured a deity, and the newborn baby she held, indirectly channeled some of His strength.

The power of a god!

Magician and Justice, though struggling to endure, remained composed. They knew they weren't alone.

Upon discovering Lady Moon's hideout in the Sacred Heart Cloister, they had anticipated the worst-case scenario.

...

On the Blue Avenger at the Lavigny Docks, The Hanged Man Alger, adorned in a sailor's attire with dark-blue hair, positioned himself at the bow of the ship. Witnessing the sudden brightening of the sky and the sun hanging low in the west, a mix of worry and excitement washed over him. Swiftly, he retrieved an item from his possession.

It was a card featuring Emperor Roselle with raised hands and a papal tiara adorning his head. Behind him, the depiction showcased lightning, violent winds, and tumultuous waves.

The Tyrant card!

One of the Cards of Blasphemy crafted by Emperor Roselle.

The Hanged Man Alger had made a special trip to Trier, abstaining from involvement in operations elsewhere, anticipating the worst calamity!

Through prior communication, pre-installed imprints, and adept prayers, as a Saint of the Sailor pathway, he possessed the ability to employ the Tyrant card. This allowed him to temporarily harness someone's power, enabling resistance against the sun in the sky without jeopardizing the stability of the astral world.

Whoosh!

As Alger bowed his head in prayer, the Tyrant card illuminated, causing Trier's sky to darken. Countless water droplets descended to the ground beneath the sunlight.
Rain, a deluge of torrential rain.

Chapter 472: Weather

Chapter 472 Weather

In the midst of the torrential rain, The Hanged Man Alger concluded his prayer.

His body involuntarily straightened, and his head snapped up.

The Tyrant card in his hand suddenly thickened and brightened, transforming into a luminous book.

The pages of the book rapidly flipped, revealing various forms of Emperor Roselle. He alternated between the attire of a Sailor, sporting a nautical hat, and singing with head held high amidst the waves...

The scene settled on the Emperor donned in a papal tiara and a pontiff's robe.

His interaction with the dim sky summoned a colossal bolt of lightning, piercing through the clouds.

Rumble!

Amidst the thunderclaps, the illusory figure of Emperor Roselle merged with The Hanged Man Alger.

His demeanor abruptly became dignified, and the Srenzo River around the Blue Avenger instantaneously calmed, resembling a windless lake.

"Adorning" the papal tiara and "draping" the pontiff's robe, The Hanged Man Alger conjured a silver staff condensed from lightning.

Stepping forward, he ascended into the sky, surrounded by the wind.

Rumble!

Above Trier, thunder roared, and a visible hurricane swept up myriad dark clouds, forming a colossal, dark, and ominous vortex.

Within the vortex, dense bolts of lightning of various hues intertwined, extending out to shroud the blazing sun in the west.

Whoosh!

The rain, like an opened faucet, cascaded into every nook of Trier, creating a misty fog that enveloped everything.

In the blink of an eye, a layer of water covered the ground, illuminated by both sunlight and lightning.

The citizens, roused by the morning sunlight, now felt an impending apocalypse as they stared at the pitch-black backdrop untouched by the blazing sunlight and snake-like lightning.

...

In the profound darkness corresponding to Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian, a colossal giant standing over ten meters tall with two additional illusory heads and four exaggerated arms, witnessed

the mysterious door to which he was attached slowly creaking open with a weighty grinding sound. Gradually, a crack emerged, and within the fissure, formless flames flickered.
This time, less than a tenth of the nearby spiritual light spots remained. The various mystical symbols and connections had either dissipated or weakened to an extreme degree.
The iron-black door, tainted with blood and rust, finally broke free from its constraints, and the crack became more pronounced.
Before the collision of torrential rain, lightning, and the sun, the formless flames behind the door retreated silently, unveiling an endless path with no discernible end.
Holding Jenna tightly, Lumian couldn't resist the ominous pull and descended through the door.
His left chest glowed, and, along with the entire Hostel and the other twelve rooms, they were on the verge of passing through the mysterious door.
...
In the real market district, on the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise.
As reality and fiction switched, Gardner Martin, Supervisor Olson, and the members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, who hadn't gone to set fire to Rist Docks and other locations, seamlessly transitioned into the painting world.
They remained on the ground, beside the deep darkness that represented Salle de Bal Brise. This was thanks to a figure who had silently materialized behind them.
Behind Supervisor Olson stood a man in formal attire, sans a bow tie. Aged between his thirties and forties, he possessed a high nose bridge, deep-set eyes, and light-blue irises. His slightly curled brown hair framed an unusually stiff countenance, his eyes reflecting open disdain and arrogance.
Behind Gardner Martin stood an old man with meticulously combed dark-red hair, clad in a blue military suit adorned with a sash and medals.
Though wrinkles marked the old man's face, his dark eyes emanated sharpness capable of toppling houses and uprooting the earth wherever they landed.
They were the president and the most powerful vice president of the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Under their guardianship, Gardner Martin and Olson remained unaffected by the heretics' ritual, refraining from entering the painting world.
As for the other upper echelons of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, they wreaked havoc in various parts of Trier, diverting the attention of official Beyonders.
Observing the dark depths of Salle de Bal Brise morph into a pair of

blood-stained iron-black doors, the four members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order entered without hesitation, as if they had executed the maneuver countless times before.

...

In the deepest depths of Red Swan Castle, within the hall located in the underground maze.

Count Poufer, clad in a robe and barefoot, had already arrived. By the glow of white candles, he fixated on the rusty bronze coffin.

The coffin's lid shifted, unveiling illusory purple flames that filled the interior.

These flames merged with the iron-black ring embedded in the ground, beneath the bronze coffin. They blended with the viscous blood and withered hearts within the ring, forming an entrance—a deep entrance tainted with blood and rust.

Through this entrance emanated a lofty, bloody, and frenzied aura from the underground.

Count Poufer trembled under the influence of the aura, yet his eyes burned with fanaticism and fearlessness.

This was his first proximity to the ancestor's mind!

A twisted smile adorned Poufer's face as he strode forward, passing through the peripheral glow of candlelight and approaching the anomalous bronze coffin.

In the entire world, only the Sauron family members with the corresponding talents who had bided their time in Red Swan Castle, the mysterious leader of the Secret Order, and the long-dead Emperor Roselle knew that beneath Red Swan Castle lay another breached seal of Fourth Epoch Trier.

The repairs had been completed using the hearts of generations of important Sauron family members as a seal, yet the problem proved irreversible.

Vermonda Champagne Sauron, who once dominated the Sauron family, had gone mad and entered the upper levels of Fourth Epoch Trier!

His frenzied spirit lingered at the seal, inextinguishable. His anguished roars echoed, affecting everyone in Red Swan Castle and those of the same bloodline.

Now, it was time to put an end to the curse that had caused the Sauron family's decline and trapped the Saurons in nightmares!

Count Poufer felt a potent sense of mission and honor. With the conviction that he would die here, he laughed maniacally, pressed his hand to the edge of the bronze coffin, and lay down.

His figure plummeted into the deep entrance stained with blood and rust.

As Count Poufer vanished into the bronze coffin, Elros Einhorn, in

a beige hunting suit with a ponytail, entered the hall.
Her gaze swept over the white candles and the bronze coffin, scrutinizing the changes in the seal. She then cut her finger, dripping three drops of bright red blood on the ground.
Lowering her head, she recited solemnly, "The embodiment of Iron and Blood, the symbol of the Calamity of War, the Priest who controls the weather, the great Snarner Einhorn..."
After finishing the incantation, the blood on the ground boiled, expanding into a blood-colored lake before condensing into a figure clad in iron-black, blood-stained armor.
Standing over 1.8 meters tall, with long dark-red hair and flamboyant golden earrings, the figure exuded androgynous, handsome features.
Darkened brown eyes fixed on Elros as the figure nodded gently and spoke,"Well done. In the previous war, the family lost its most important object. We must seize every opportunity to make up for our losses, even if it's just a portion."
With that, Snarner Einhorn entered the deep entrance of the bronze coffin.
Elros's eyes flickered as she observed the scene.
Finally, she sighed and said, "Regardless, the Sauron family's curse will end..."
...
In Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Franca, with a mixture of surprise and concern, took out the Primordial Demoness's bone figurine and the ancient silver mirror she had obtained from underground.
Uncertain about the significance of the abnormality in these two items, she decided to place them at a distance. Her plan was to wait and observe subsequent changes before deciding on the next course of action.
At that precise moment, the classic silver mirror unexpectedly reflected the Primordial Demoness figurine, even though it wasn't in its line of sight. This occurrence triggered a seismic disturbance throughout Rue des Blouses Blanches.
Dark light surged from the mirror, enveloping Franca and Anthony Reid before they could employ any abilities.
As the darkness subsided, only the coffee table, sofa, and various furnishings remained in Apartment 601.
Adjacent to the mural depicting a segment of the market district, behind the ecstatic Painter, an ancient silver mirror detached from the painting world and gently descended into the shadows. Gradually sinking deeper and deeper, it swiftly vanished.
...

Amidst the indescribable heat and the swirling world, Lumian and Jenna landed on a ground covered in pale-black stone bricks.

Their eyes were met with the sight of a magnificent city in the distance, featuring asymmetrical black buildings and vibrant red houses.

A thin fog intermittently shrouded the city, giving it the appearance of a mirage, the kind occasionally encountered by pirates and sailors.

In the wilderness beyond the city, dark clouds gathered, lightning flashed, thunder rumbled, and rain poured. A colossal figure, dozens of meters tall, stood surrounded by these natural phenomena, barely visible and indistinguishable.

"He" lingered outside the city, enveloped in smoke, flames, hail, lightning, torrential rain, and violent winds, as if perpetual.

Is this Fourth Epoch Trier? Lumian speculated, though uncertainty lingered. This wasn't quite what he had expected.

Jenna subconsciously turned to look at him and noticed that he had reverted to his original appearance, no longer abnormally huge. He no longer possessed three heads and six arms.

Chapter 473: Weakening of Corruption

Chapter 473 Weakening of Corruption

"You've recovered," Jenna whispered to Lumian.

She refrained from speaking loudly, fearing that it might agitate her companion and trigger the same mutation again. Plus, there was the concern of attracting the ominous giant's attention, shrouded in smoke and rain that made it elusive.

Lumian locked eyes with Jenna and realized from the reflection that he was back to normal.

Subconsciously, he responded, "This means the Hostel ritual, conducted by the heretics using me as a template, has ended..."

Suddenly alert, Lumian scanned the area.

With the Hostel ritual concluded, he anticipated the arrival of the evil gods' bestowed from the other twelve rooms.

His gaze focused on an unusual area adorned with pale-black stone bricks, dominating the scenery.

It sprawled out, filling Lumian's field of view, except for where it stopped short of the distant grand city and the colossal figure amidst the turbulent weather.

Stretching across his vision, grayish-white stone pillars loomed every 20 to 30 meters, some standing tall and others succumbing to collapse. These pillars, broad enough to span the reach of three to four people, obstructed Lumian's and Jenna's view beyond.

The sky above, supported by these stone sentinels, took on an odd translucency, as though an unseen fire silently raged, invisible to the naked eye.

The resulting glow cast an eerie brightness, akin to dusk on a war-torn battlefield. Lumian, lacking Dark Vision, could perceive his surroundings clearly without conjuring a crimson fireball.

He didn't notice Madame Pualis and the other bestowed of evil gods.

"Did the residents of the Hostel not enter, or are they scattered in various places, arriving at random locations?" he mused aloud.

Unfazed, he redirected his focus, hoping Jenna possessed the pertinent information.

Though Jenna grappled with the concept of "random," she grasped Lumian's intent.

Without delving deeper into that mystery, she pivoted to the more pressing concern.

"What should we do now?"

At the same time, Jenna made a connection.

The Hostel was created using Ciel as a template... Based on the mystical knowledge involved in a Demoness's curse, could Ciel

harbor an evil god's bestowed within him? Uh... He seemed to have mentioned before that he had Mr. Fool's seal on him, and the one sealed is an evil god's bestowed? The transformation was actually similar to the effects of a curse, but due to the seal, there were no serious consequences?

What do we do? Lumian assessed the chaotic scene before him: a colossal, blurry giant amid smoke, rain, lightning, and flames. He chuckled,

"Our move now is to put some distance between us and that giant."

"We'll head in the opposite direction of the city, find a secure hiding spot, and observe the unfolding events. Our goal is to locate an exit swiftly."

Despite feeling an unusual pull towards the giant and the city, Lumian managed to resist. He was no longer under the intense attraction that had gripped him before—now that he lacked an angelic level. Rationality prevailed as he carefully considered the risks and benefits.

The giant, undoubtedly godlike in nature, seemed to be in a state of madness. Lumian, a Sequence 6 Conspirer, couldn't afford to approach it casually. Just a glance could make him lose control!

The city, possibly Fourth Epoch Trier, held its own dangers—one that caused even demigods to perish within—with potential undead creatures and corruption like the old bones. Lumian had The Fool's seal and the aura of Blood Emperor Alista Tudor, but he couldn't feel as relaxed, carefree, or fearless as returning to Cordu before the corruption.

If he had entered the Fourth Epoch's Trier with such intentions, he might have turned into an irrational, perpetually lingering monster sealed with an angel in the blink of an eye.

With that, Lumian turned and sprinted in the opposite direction of the giant's figure in the ever-changing weather, away from the magnificent city.

He needed to put some distance between himself and the looming threat. Nobody could predict if the massive creature would make any noise!

The unrestrained voices of high-level Beyonders posed a grave danger to Mid-Sequence Beyonders.

Jenna put her trust in the seasoned Ciel and followed him with grace. They maneuvered past the grayish-white stone pillars, some standing tall while others lay in ruins, pushing further into the area paved with light-black stone bricks.

As Lumian sprinted, a slight frown creased his forehead.

He could feel a significant drain on his spirituality after the intense battle in the painting world and multiple Spirit World

Traversals. If another mishap occurred, he questioned how long he could endure.
I need to find a way to replenish my spirituality... In reality, it's midnight. Should I lay low until 6 a.m.? Lumian contemplated as he dashed forward.
...
In the fake market district on the surface, torrential rain cascaded upon Séraphine and the other "rooms."
They stood on the street across from Salle de Bal Brise, their chests radiating with various hues.
One by one, figures materialized, piercing through the void and descending into the profound darkness. They entered the iron-black door tainted with blood and rust within the depths of the shadows.
Séraphine gazed at the surreal scene, her vacant eyes and rigid expression suddenly overtaken by sorrow. Rainwater drenched her long brown hair.
Beside her, Gabriel's face beamed with joy as he spoke in an otherworldly tone, "Is it over? Can we be together forever?"
Séraphine's rain-soaked face twisted. She instructed Gabriel, "Leave this place and stay away from me!"
"Why?" Gabriel questioned, perplexed.
Séraphine's role as a Hostel Room had been fulfilled. There shouldn't be anything else, right?
The monster could resume its normal life.
Séraphine uttered in pain, "With the tenants gone, the Hostel's rooms no longer hold any value..."
Before she could finish, a pair of transparent dragonfly-like wings sprouted from her back, etched with open, cold eyes.
Silently, Séraphine's form disintegrated. The wet lake-blue dress lost its support and plummeted to the ground. Adorned with writhing flesh and blood, each piece bore dragonfly-like, dreamy wings and eye-like patterns.
Séraphine's head remained relatively intact. Surrounded by blood dragonflies, a few wheat ears and mushrooms sprouted from her face. Raindrops struck her face and slid.
She opened her mouth, as if leading to another world, and her voice turned shrill.
"We're not bestowed, but the work of pixies!
"Go!"
Gabriel stared vacantly at Séraphine, a composition of blood dragonflies and a head. An indescribable sorrow etched across his empty, cold face.
In the midst of the pouring rain and sunlight, he instinctively took

a few steps in the opposite direction before halting.
The playwright turned, retracing his steps toward Séraphine.
A gentle smile curled on the corners of his mouth.
"I'd forgotten. I'm already a monster. Where can I go?
"I'm grateful you let me run on my own in the end."
As Gabriel spoke, he bent down, allowing his knees to touch the ground and the puddles.
His arms enveloped the countless blood dragonflies and Séraphine's struggling head, and he planted a deep kiss on the lips adorned with wheat ears and mushrooms.
Thud! Thud! Thud! The blood dragonflies sliced through his flesh with their wings, burrowing into his body, draining his life force.
He persisted in the kiss.
Raindrops pelted them.
Before long, translucent and dreamy wings emerged from Gabriel's back, stained with blood.
Amidst the spine-chilling gnawing sounds, Gabriel's body collapsed and melted, likewise for Séraphine's head.
In the midst of the ensuing blood, strange-shaped dragonflies with translucent wings, resembling meatballs, soared into the air, resembling bright fireworks in a storm.
Suddenly, blazing sunlight descended, engulfing the area and the abnormal bodies.
Not far away, Angoulême, Valentine, and Imre spread their arms in unison.
Upon returning to église Saint-Robert, they remained unaffected by the ritual, no longer within the world of the painting. They stayed grounded, and once the situation stabilized, they made their way to Salle de Bal Brise.
...
Quartier éraste, Sacred Heart Cloister.
Storms and lightning veiled the golden sun, but for now, they couldn't thwart the sunlight from piercing through.
This caused the entrance to Salle de Bal Brise to blur and tremble, yet it persisted. The painting world that had swapped with the surface gradually became ethereal, drawing nearer to returning to the rock wall.
After Magician and Justice escaped the onslaught of sunlight, they realized they had lost Lady Moon's trail.
The former's eyes sparkled with resplendent stars.
Soon, she "saw" Lady Moon's silhouette.
The evil god's Blessed didn't conceal herself as she forcefully entered the unstable darkness and the mysterious, illusory iron-colored door.

With a flash of starlight, the Major Arcana card holders, Magician and Justice, arrived outside Salle de Bal Brise.
The two hesitated, uncertain whether to pursue her.
At that moment, Justice softly exclaimed, "I feel that the underground's allure and beckoning towards me have weakened..."
Their hesitance stemmed from the fact that delving deep underground into Fourth Epoch Trier would subject them to immense and abnormally terrifying corruption for demigods.
The heretics didn't mind. Essentially, they had gone mad. At most, their madness would be more intricate and thorough, but they had no choice but to consider this issue.
"The corruption has weakened?" Magician was surprised.
As far as she knew, only two individuals could cause this phenomenon:
One was Mr. Fool or The Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings. By temporarily bolstering the seal's power, They could curb the various corruptions in Fourth Epoch Trier and diminish them.
The other was the deity who had gained a rudimentary grasp of the greatest abnormality underground: "The Lord that created everything, the omnipotent and omniscient God, the Lord who reigns behind the curtain of shadows, the ruler of the mind world, and the degenerated nature of all living things."

Chapter 474: Encounter

Justice, adorned in a simple yet elegant dress, turned her head to glance at Magician, discerning her thoughts.

The woman nodded slightly and uttered, "It would have been abnormal if He hadn't intervened in this incident. You, too, know what He wants most."

Magician didn't hesitate. With a sigh and a chuckle, she stepped into the faltering darkness.

Justice followed closely behind.

As they vanished, sunlight flooded the sky from Saint Vièvе Cathedral on Trier's island area, coalescing into a miniature sun.

The sun's rays pierced the darkness of Salle de Bal Brise, illuminating a translucent woman in a white robe adorned with golden threads. She possessed a captivating beauty and emitted a holy aura, as if impervious to the touch of dust.

Trier's guardian angel paid no heed to the Sacred Heart Cloister as she passed through the illusory door with a crack.

Simultaneously, a whistle resonated from the patriarchal cathedral of the God of Steam and Machinery to the north of Trier.

As if part of a ritual, it emitted an iron-black chimney, serving as the building's spire.

A substantial amount of pale-white fog billowed into the air, contorting and writhing to take on a discernible form.

The figure that materialized was tall and handsome, with long chestnut hair. Cloaked in a monk-like gray robe and a white apron,

He was Saint Bornova, recently assigned to the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery in Trier.

Unlike Saint Vièvе, the Angel didn't enter the seal; instead, He hovered in the air, vigilant against potential mishaps, including an attack from the Rose School of Thought's Abomination.

At that moment, a colossal hurricane erupted, enshrouding the golden sun above the Sacred Heart Cloister in dark clouds, lightning, and torrential rain.

With the advent of this apocalyptic phenomenon, the already unstable effects of the ritual, disrupted by various interferences, could no longer be sustained. The figures in the paintings lingering on the ground and the illusory illusions of surrounding buildings became instantly recognizable as fake.

This virtual reality-like scene seamlessly overlapped with the tangible market district once more.

Just as the surface and the underground were on the brink of switching, a figure materialized abruptly in front of the mirror-

like darkness of Salle de Bal Brise.
This figure sported straight eyebrows and blue eyes, along with long chestnut hair cascading to the waist. Adorned in a white shirt with ribbons and flowers, a brown captain's coat with intricate patterns, beige pants, and dark brown leather boots, the ensemble exuded an eclectic charm.
In her left hand, she gripped a golden item engraved with mysterious patterns, resembling a miniature lamp.
Silently, the wick extending from the lamp's mouth spontaneously ignited, emitting a viscous, aqueous golden light.
Within the luminous glow, a distorted and indistinct pale-gold figure materialized. In a dignified and majestic voice, it conveyed,
"To resolve your father's problem, we can only allow Him to accept another corruption at the same level—one more compatible with Him—forming a certain balance..."
The woman holding the peculiar lamp scrutinized the pale-golden figure deeply before her body suddenly turned ethereal, disintegrating into countless symbols and words. Like a torrent, she surged through the iron-black door and the completely collapsed darkness.
...
Franca and Anthony Reid, emerging from the dark light, regained their vision to find themselves in a dimly lit mine.
A feeble light seeped into the mine from a distance, offering limited visibility.
Damn it, did I enter that special mirror world again? Did the anomaly in the market district cause the Primordial Demoness's figurine to resonate with the ancient mirror, triggering a chain reaction? Franca cursed inwardly.
What is this called? When it rains, it pours!
As a Spectator, Anthony Reid's immediate response upon confirming his condition was to observe his surroundings.
He noted that the mine wasn't overly expansive, with no other tunnels branching off. There was only one path ahead, leading toward the faint light.
Franca, in that moment, realized that this place differed from her previous visits. It felt like she had reached the end of a particular dead end. Granted, she and Lumian had never thoroughly explored this special mirror world, making it normal for them to be unfamiliar with uncharted areas.
"Where are we?" Anthony Reid inquired of Franca, who clearly held some knowledge, when he saw a figure emerge from a crevice in the rock wall beside him.
The figure curled up and hugged him, trembling.

The figure, dressed in military-green attire and sporting a light-yellow crew cut, was Anthony Reid himself!
As if sensing Anthony's gaze, the figure turned his head, his dark brown eyes filled with resentment and malice.
Unfazed, Franca sighed with familiarity. "Your mirror version isn't too aggressive."
The trembling Anthony Reid vanished.
Franca averted her gaze and briefly elucidated their location and the means of departure.
Upon checking her belongings, she realized that only the ancient silver mirror was missing. The Primordial Demoness's bone figurine remained securely in her possession.
Franca concluded, "The problem now is that the path out is guarded by a powerful monster. I relied on Ciel's uniqueness to divert it last time. I don't know what to do now.
"Let's find another exit first. Yes, we have to hurry. Staying in this mirror world for too long will cause problems."
"Alright." Anthony Reid, lacking experience in this area, chose to heed Franca's suggestion.
The two of them paid no mind to the faces lurking in the darkness on either side. They swiftly moved forward and entered the only tunnel.
As they progressed, the illumination increased, and visibility improved.
After walking for a while, Franca and Anthony Reid halted at a suspected exit.
It resembled a cave, sealed by pure light.
After exchanging glances, Franca initiated the use of Magic Mirror Divination and other methods to confirm the authenticity and danger of the exit.
However, she received no response.
"Phew..." Franca exhaled and said to Anthony Reid, "Let's give it a try. If it's not right, we'll retreat. There's no other way."
"Okay." Anthony Reid nodded and placed his hand on the door of light alongside Franca.
Their figures passed through.
...
Lumian and Jenna sprinted between towering, collapsed grayish-white stone pillars until they reached the edge of the area covered in pale-black stone bricks.
However, what awaited them was still the pitch-black and blood-red city, with the giant figure shrouded in violent winds, lightning, heavy rain, smoke, and flames.
The only change was their perspective, now positioned on the side

instead of facing the giant and the turbulent weather.
Confused, Jenna muttered, "We were running in the opposite direction. Why did we circle back?"
Lumian glanced back and explained, "As a Hunter, it's unlikely for me to get lost. The current situation suggests that there's a problem with the directions of this space. Perhaps, no matter where we run, we'll eventually return to this vicinity."
Fortunately, the distance between them and the giant figure had barely increased, estimated to be two to three thousand meters.
Upon hearing Lumian's explanation, Jenna cast her gaze forward.
Beyond the pale-black stone bricks, in the wilderness connected to the majestic city, mirror fragments were scattered. They weren't large, but there were thousands of them.
Lumian surveyed the scene, contemplating an alternative plan.
A sudden realization struck him—a swift method to rapidly restore his spirituality.
In a space effective at weakening the influence of an evil god, he could execute a ritual, siphon the boon, and ascend to Sequence 6 Ascetic of the Inevitability pathway!
By destabilizing various states, the ritual would promptly restore and amplify Lumian's spirituality.
In essence, he could exchange the stability of his current state for the enhancement and replenishment of his spirituality.
Before initiating the ritual, Lumian needed to ascertain one crucial detail.
Would this place render Mr. Fool incapable of observation?
If that were the case, Termiboros might exploit the ritual to escape with the unintelligent seal itself. After all, the core of the ritual involved breaking the seal and drawing out the corresponding power of Inevitability!
Just as Lumian was about to instruct Jenna to keep a vigilant watch, a figure emerged from a shattered mirror in the wilderness.
Their pupils dilated, and instinctively, Lumian and Jenna sought cover behind the grayish-white stone pillar and the partially collapsed rubble.
The figure swiftly materialized, standing over 1.7 meters tall and clad in a black cloak.
Lumian stole a quick glance in that direction before retracting his gaze.
The figure seemed oddly familiar.
Before long, a familiar voice rang out from the side.
"You're not slow either."
Th-this is Gardner Martin! He's involved too? Lumian didn't dare to

peek out.
Then, he recalled the identity of the cloaked figure.
The Carbonari member he had encountered, the one followed by Franca!
Shouldn't the Carbonari be causing chaos on the surface? Lumian wondered.
At that moment, Jenna produced a mirror and gestured if Lumian needed assistance.
She could use mirror magic, utilizing mirror-like items to display their reflections onto a designated mirror.
Numerous mirror fragments lay nearby at the edge of the wilderness.
Lumian shook his head slowly and mouthed and gestured to Jenna, signaling her to "Wait a moment."
He decided to act at a critical juncture. There was no need to take unnecessary risks at this point.
At that moment, a mellow, deep voice responded to Gardner Martin, "Where's the president of your Iron and Blood Cross Order?"
"Headed there, of course," Gardner Martin replied with a smile. "It's the stage for important figures, and we have our own mission."
He paused a beat before continuing, "Why are you still wearing the cloak? Is it someone new beneath?"
"You're still as cautious as ever," the deep voice sighed.
Lumian and Jenna heard the rustling of clothes.
Lumian immediately signaled Jenna with his eyes.
Jenna took the hint and recited the incantation silently, her hand resting on the mirror.
The aqueous light on the mirror's surface flickered, revealing a figure.
The figure wore a cloak without the hood. His hair was thick and slightly curly, and his eyes were as sharp as an eagle's. His beard was neatly trimmed, and the bridge of his nose was slightly raised.
Wh— Lumian recognized the person.
Philip!
The deceased General Philip!

Chapter 475: Conspirer

Recognizing the black-cloaked man as the late General Philip, a surge of realization struck Lumian's mind, cutting through the darkness.

He connected various dots and reevaluated details he had previously deemed a stretch.

Earlier, Lumian had queried Gardner Martin about his support for Hugues Artois, the spokesperson of numerous evil gods. Martin asserted that he was well aware of Artois's nature and the sinister forces backing him. Martin endorsed Artois for parliament with the belief that he would repeatedly bring calamity to the market district, compelling citizens and workers to rally behind the Iron and Blood Cross Order, preparing for a future government overthrow.

Until today, Lumian had accepted this reasoning on the surface. Even if Martin hadn't disclosed the complete truth, he had unveiled a fraction of it. However, now it appeared that 90% of Martin's statement was a fabrication!

Hugues Artois had been groomed by the late General Philip and thrust into politics. Gardner Martin had clearly established a cooperative relationship with General Philip long ago. His backing of Hugues Artois wasn't merely an opportunistic exploit; rather, he had been intricately involved in the plan from the outset!

Similarly, General Philip, having feigned his death and diverged from his intended fate, utilized the Dreamseekers charity organization to finance Painters and other evil god-bestowed. Simultaneously, he joined the Carbonari, fomenting riots and rebellions. Lumian found this not entirely surprising, but the connection with Gardner Martin and the Iron and Blood Cross Order added an intriguing layer to the details.

By the time the Hostel ritual officially commenced, Lumian had already grasped the essence of this conspiracy. Yet, some explanations seemed a bit forced. For instance, how had Meyer Maipú, having left the Bliss Society in frustration and returned to the market district to prove himself, managed to contact the Painters or the evil gods' bestowed planning the Hostel ritual?

One plausible explanation was that Susanna—while still the high priestess of the Bliss Society—had established connections with other cults before her demise. As Maipú Meyer's lover and a crucial member of the Bliss Society, he should have had some contacts. However, upon closer scrutiny, it felt a tad contrived. Did Maipú Meyer truly maintain good relationships with believers of other evil gods? Would he naturally seek their aid when confronting

challenges to prove himself?
Despite Maipú Meyer's knowledge of an Angel sealed within Lumian's body, he couldn't fathom exploiting this information beyond offering sacrifices. Unless the Mother Tree of Desire bestowed a revelation directly, why wouldn't the Recipient, potentially having received a divine revelation, flaunt it? *Why face ostracism from other Bliss Society members?*
Lumian found that all the details made more sense now that Gardner Martin and his connection to General Philip were revealed as part of the conspiracy.
Following the Tree of Shadow disaster, Gardner Martin tasked Lumian, Franca, and their subordinates in the market district with investigating the incident and Hugues Artois's assassination. However, he would undoubtedly gather information about the Bliss Society's actions, mistakes, and issues through General Philip. In these circumstances, Maipú Meyer, seeking a return to the market district, naturally established a connection with General Philip, who had shown interest in such matters, and provided crucial information. Consequently, Gardner Martin had long been aware of what was sealed within Lumian.
The entire Hostel ritual might have been conceived by him, General Philip, and the Painters.
One of them harbored a longstanding desire for Fourth Epoch Trier and possessed extensive knowledge of secrets and mysticism. They understood the seal's operation and its past leaks. Salle de Bal Brise, owned by the Savoie Mob, and 13 Avenue du Marché served as a testing ground for the Iron and Blood Cross Order's new members.
The other had a deep connection to the domain of fate. Through the financial support of the Dreamseekers charity organization, he had united many cults, accumulating vast knowledge in various aspects.
The reason why Hugues Artois had numerous evil gods' bestowed protecting him wasn't merely due to his ability to interact with problematic individuals or the deeply ingrained "enlightened" perception he had on others. Instead, it was because his backer, General Philip, a veteran of large-scale wars, had long been dedicated to cooperating with heretics to achieve a crucial goal.
Lumian suspected that Gardner Martin hadn't officially tested him and allowed him to join the Iron and Blood Cross Order out of initial trust. Instead, he had finalized the Hostel plan and decided to keep Lumian under close watch, exerting various influences and manipulating him.
If the Tarot Club hadn't intervened and the ritual hadn't been

hastily advanced, it was highly likely that Gardner Martin or a demigod of the Iron and Blood Cross Order would have been the one to ultimately confront Lumian and transport him into the painting world to activate the ritual!

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian's understanding became clear.

Everything Gardner Martin had undertaken since the Tree of Shadow disaster was geared towards the Hostel ritual!

As expected of a former or current Conspirer... Lumian sighed sincerely.

Certainly, Gardner Martin might not have been aware of the residual aura of Blood Emperor Alista Tudor that Lumian carried, but he likely harbored suspicions. However, he couldn't fathom the core issue. After all, he was aware that an Angel was sealed within Lumian Lee's body, a walking anomaly bound to attract attention.

Regarding whether Gardner Martin knew about another organization backing him and Franca, Lumian believed that Martin had sensed something awry, but the precise details remained elusive. Even Maipú Meyer, not present at the Tree of Shadow ritual, was unaware of the events during that time.

Lumian signaled Jenna to cease the mirror magic to evade detection by Gardner Martin and General Philip. Meanwhile, he pondered.

Why does the Iron and Blood Cross Order covet Fourth Epoch Trier so intensely, going to such lengths in preparation? What is their ultimate goal?

If I hadn't arrived in Trier, stayed at Auberge du Coq Doré, and attracted the Fallen Tree Spirit Susanna Mattise, what would have been the original plan of the Iron and Blood Cross Order and the various cults? How did they intend to bypass the seal and unlock the door to Fourth Epoch Trier?

As the latter question surfaced, Lumian recalled something.

Gardner Martin had once directed "Rat" Christo's smuggling caravan to transport an item into Trier through an underground tunnel. This item activated the special mirror world hidden underground. Later, Franca sensed that item while tracking the black-cloaked Carbonari member, General Philip, who had faked his death...

Now, General Philip had also entered this place, suspected to be Fourth Epoch Trier!

They had made extensive preparations, including orchestrating a massive riot. Their goal was to use that item and its connection to the mirror fragments in the wilderness to infiltrate this place through the seal leak that once appeared beneath Salle de Bal Brise. Later, they had a better choice—me...

Dammit! Gardner Martin's words about why he supported Hugues Artois's election as a member of parliament were mostly true! He did need such a person to incite public anger in the market district, not to overthrow the government, but to satisfy the ritual!
Heh heh, pushing villains into power while posing as the leader of the resistance. He's both the antagonist and the protagonist. He's truly extracting the value from all the people in the market district dry... Lumian reacquainted himself with the Sequence name "Conspirer" through Gardner Martin.
At that moment, Jenna grasped Lumian's meaning and discontinued the mirror magic.
Gardner Martin smiled and said, "It's indeed you, Philip. Let's enter Fourth Epoch Trier."
Philip... Jenna, who had only a vague impression of General Philip's photo from the shadows, now realized that the cloaked man Franca had been trailing was General Philip, the one who had faked his death.
Philip's deep, mellow voice resounded.
"Aren't you going to find Lumian Lee? If he becomes your loyal subordinate and joins your team, you can immediately complete the ritual, consume the potion, and advance to a demigod."
Gardner Martin sighed and responded, "I find it a pity too. An Angel is sealed within him, and he alone is a team. I've given him many chances, but he never understood what loyalty meant. Now, I have an alternative. Let him perish naturally in Fourth Epoch Trier."
An Angel sealed within him? Jenna's eyes widened as she looked at Lumian.
Lumian smirked and scoffed at Gardner Martin's words.
I'd be a fool to believe you!
The person scheming to use me from the start talking about loyalty and pity?
Just as Gardner Martin and General Philip turned around to walk toward the magnificent city, two figures emerged from a mirror fragment in the nearby wilderness.
It was Franca, dressed in a blouse, beige white breeches, a small dark brown coat, and black leather boots, along with Anthony Reid, clad in military green.
Franca scanned the surroundings and spotted Gardner Martin, encased in full-body silver armor with his visor raised.
Anthony Reid's gaze locked onto General Philip's face, featuring a prominent bulge on his nose.
The eight eyes met, and the air momentarily froze.
...
Count Poufer's figure materialized at the edge of the wilderness, in

front of the pale-black stone bricks.
Gazing at the giant shrouded in storms, lightning, flames, and smoke, standing dozens of meters tall, he sprinted over with the fanatical expression of a sacrificial lamb.
It was Vermonda Sauron, who had lost control and gone underground.
The former Archangel, the Conqueror, who was very close to a deity's throne!

Chapter 476: Calamity Giant

Count Poufer charged through the tempest, battling fierce winds, drenching rain, and bolts of lightning. Meanwhile, the Pixie in the distinctive blue beret—the overseer of the Hostel, positioned near the shroud of darkness around Salle de Bal Brise—took advantage of the moment and slipped through the enigmatic iron-colored door.

Fully aware of the peril awaiting her inside, she felt compelled by the will of a deity. Even the prospect of death didn't daunt her. It would only earn her the deity's favor and a return to the eternal realm of fantasy.

Regrettably, upon her arrival, she found herself suspended in the midst of the raging storm, amidst smoke and flames.

The colossal figure was clearly reflected in her eyes.

It resembled a horrifying charred giant, its once-fleshy exterior now absent. The charred metal skeleton, engulfed in blazing purple flames, formed what seemed like an intact body, but cracks riddled its structure. Continuously emanating illusory symbols—lightning, hail, fog—the majestic purple flames and the iron-black metal skeleton held inscrutable knowledge, representing countless real phenomena.

Drip, drip. Blood-hued, magma-like pus oozed from the cracks, transforming into black purple flames and various weather phenomena midair.

Witnessing this, the Pixie in the blue beret combusted from within. Instinctive fear flashed in her eyes as she desperately reached into the void, entering an intangible state.

Yet, her physical form did not change for the better.

With a swift whoosh, every cell in the Pixie's being ignited, including the translucent dragonfly-like wings on her back.

After enduring agonizing contortions, she metamorphosed into a Pixie crafted from crimson flames. Lifeless eyes stared out from her now-empty gaze.

Within the fiery dragonfly wings, the altered Pixie danced around the giant's figure, as if escorting him.

Rumble!

Count Poufer was struck by bolts of lightning, and nearby, purple flames erupted.

Drenched in the relentless rain, enduring hailstones that battered him until he bled, he persevered through the thick smoke.

Perhaps due to the Sauron family's bloodline coursing through him, he remained unaffected by the surrounding chaos.

As the smoke cleared and the storm abated, Poufer eagerly gazed at

the towering giant, dozens of meters tall.
Within the iron-black skull and amidst the purple flames, a distorted face of pain intermittently flickered.
The face bore some resemblance to Poufer, except its eyes, weathered and blood-black, were deathly still and vacant.
Upon spotting the giant, Count Poufer also ignited in flames.
Excruciating pain wracked him, yet his gaze remained fixed on the giant's face.
Amidst the encircling purple flames, faces filled with venom, hatred, and madness, as if cursing all living beings, alternated.
Men and women, bearing a resemblance to both the giant and Count Poufer, emerged on the surface of withered hearts floating in the flames.
Poufer glimpsed the family's forebears from the oil paintings.
Despite the difficulty, his mouth curled up, his face contorted by the flames.
In the turmoil, he transformed into a flaming pixie as well.
However, instead of circling the rampaging giant, he was drawn by his family's bloodline into the perilous purple flames on the iron-black head, into Vermonda's face that flickered in and out.
In an instant, the two fused.
Vermonda's mouth twitched, a hint of liveliness in his eyes.
He opened his mouth and let out a scream filled with destructive desire and madness.
With this scream, the ground, scorched by the purple flames, shook dramatically, and earth puppets crawled out.
These puppets—equally tall at three to four meters tall, charred with an iron hue—were speckled with dark-red blood.
Transforming as they squirmed, the earth puppets became soldiers, guarding the area with a semblance of life.
Almost simultaneously, a fiery meteor descended from the heavens.
Streaking across the sky, it plummeted towards the edge of the fog.
Bang!
A figure emerged amidst the meteorite-like crash and ensuing tremors, standing upright.
It was Snarner Einhorn, adorned in iron-black, blood-stained armor.
The 1.8-meter-tall Angel, with long dark-red hair and flamboyant earrings, didn't hesitate. His body expanded, unveiling a Mythical Creature form reminiscent of Vermonda Sauron's current state.
It was a giant, a representation of calamity, crafted from flames and various symbolic elements.
...

Under the silent blaze of invisible flames in the sky, across the wilderness, Pualis de Roquefort, draped in an elegant black dress and a veiled hat, fixed her gaze on the majestic city not far away.
She didn't get her husband, butler, and children to enter the Hostel. Instead, she arranged for them to temporarily depart Trier and reside in a suburban town beyond the city wall.
After a brief survey, Madame Pualis turned her attention to the man merely 20 to 30 meters away.
Despite appearing in his fifties, his dense blond hair showed only slight traces of gray, and his lake-blue eyes were clear.
Neatly encircling his mouth, the beard framed his unusually deep facial features. It was evident he had been a handsome man in his youth.
He was the Circle Inhabitant of the Sinners, Voisin Sanson!
Roche Louis Sanson's father.
Madame Pualis shifted her gaze back to the seemingly boundless city, sensing an inexplicable calling from somewhere. It was gradually contracting and expanding, akin to the embrace of a long-forgotten mother.
She took a step forward.
...
Franca hadn't anticipated encountering Gardner Martin immediately upon exiting the mirror world.
As an undercover agent for both the Tarot Club and the Demoness Sect, she felt a twinge of guilt instinctively. The urge to casually greet him with a "what a coincidence" surfaced subconsciously. However, she was no longer the naive rookie from her initial transmigration. Her worldly and combat experiences ranked among the elite in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. Swiftly reacting, she yelled at Anthony Reid, "Duck," and, turning invisible, lunged to the side.
Almost simultaneously, dozens, perhaps hundreds, of blazing white fireballs materialized around Gardner Martin. His eyes were profound, body clad in silver armor, as the fireballs howled and erupted at the previous location of Franca and Anthony Reid.
Anthony, his gaze fixed on General Philip's black-cloaked figure, heard Franca's warning, "duck," echoing in his ears.
Experienced, though unsure of what to expect, he followed his teammate's advice. Adjusting his body mid-air, he kicked down with both feet, hurtling toward General Philip without picking a side.
Amidst the explosive chaos, General Philip was astonished to find a slightly greasy middle-aged man in military-green camouflage clothing glaring at him with hatred, launching towards him.

Does he hold a grudge against me? Philip wondered, his eyes darkening as focus slipped away.
He "saw" a myriad of intertwined fates and discerned the threads' approximate origins.
So, you're a survivor of the sacrificial company... Lucky enough to escape back then, and now you dare return for revenge? General Philip sneered with disdain.
As a Sequence 5 Reaper of the Hunter pathway, he made the decision to put his faith in the great Goddess of Fate and receive the corresponding boon. This choice stemmed from his firsthand recognition of the limitations and issues within his original pathway in the mysticism domain, along with the impending apocalypse he couldn't avoid.
His aim was clear—to swiftly ascend to demigod status, securing the protection of a mighty existence to endure the impending apocalypse. Ordinary channels simply couldn't provide him with what he needed.
Despite the initial weaknesses and constraints of the Goddess of Fate's pathway, he accepted it without hesitation.
It was worth noting that the boon corresponding to Sequence 9, Dreamless, merely granted him a dreamless state and the ability to sense the flow of fate. Consequently, he forfeited the potential of gaining revelations through his spirituality via dreams.
Sequence 8 Musicians were a slight improvement. In certain worlds, Musicians often blinded themselves to enhance their focus on the voice of fate before playing it like a symphony. However, this method demanded extensive preparation and sufficient time to orchestrate the tune in order to influence a target's fate.
As for Sequence 7 Fate Pryers, they shared essential similarities with Seers. However, unlike Seers, they didn't require a medium to directly perceive or hear the revelations of fate.
By Sequence 6, the bestowed of the Goddess of Fate finally acquired relatively potent abilities. Those who glimpsed fate could convey it and directly impact a target, but each usage came with a significant drawback—a self-imposed silence lasting for an extended period.
This Sequence was known as Mute.
Only after faking his death and breaking free from his original fate did the Sequence 5 Deceased no longer bear the previous restrictions. They could now function relatively normally.
As a dual Sequence 5, General Philip unraveled the threads of fate, discerning the origin of Anthony Reid's animosity. He chuckled, releasing a voice that seemed confined for an eternity.
"Fate can't be avoided. You'll ultimately end up as my sacrifice."

Amidst these words and the explosive tumult, Anthony Reid's mind replayed the harrowing scene of the camp attack, causing him to break out into a tremble.

Thud! He landed on the ground and clutched his head in fear.

Not far away, concealed behind a half-collapsed grayish-white stone pillar, Lumian and Jenna both heard Franca's urgent cry to "duck."

Franca has entered too? *How did she do it?* Lumian wondered, a sense of alarm coursing through him.

Chapter 477: Frenzy

Chapter 477 Frenzy

Lumian felt a brief moment of surprise before taking a shot in the dark.

Considering that General Philip likely used a special item to access the underground mirror world, Lumian figured Franca, equipped with the ancient silver mirror boasting the same powers, should have a shot at it too.

The why and what of it didn't matter now. Those questions could wait until after dealing with Gardner Martin and General Philip or finding a way to slip past them. There might be a chance to escape this place.

At the fringes of the wilderness, Gardner Martin's attempts to flush out Franca from her invisibility failed, even after a series of explosions.

His former lover had vanished to some unknown spot.

Being a Demoness of Pleasure, Franca relied on her Assassin abilities, leaving no footprints, masking her scent and spiritual aura. It made her a formidable challenge to track, countering a Hunter's knack for gathering environmental intel.

Gardner Martin, donned in silver-white full-body armor, kept on the move. Familiar with the Demoness pathway's traits and abilities, he knew that, having ascended to Pleasure, Franca didn't need blood, hair, or nails for her curses. Reflecting him into mirrors and enveloping him in black flames would do the trick. He couldn't stand still for more than three seconds, to prevent himself from being reflected in the mirror.

As he swiftly maneuvered, Gardner Martin glanced at Philip and Anthony, the information broker. He noticed the latter lying on the ground, clutching his head and trembling. Anthony sporadically used Placate on himself, resigning from resistance. Philip's black cloak expanded slightly, and crimson, nearly white flaming ravens materialized beside him, as if preparing for a grand sacrifice.

Observing the scene, Gardner Martin paid no heed to the ongoing battle. He raised his right hand and lowered his visor.

A broadsword, aglow with condensed light, materialized in Gardner Martin's grip, casting a radiant and holy Sunrise Gleam over a vast expanse. Its brilliance dispelled illusions, compelling shadows to retreat and revealing Franca's ponytailed form more than ten meters behind him.

This was the power of a Sequence 6 Dawn Paladin of the Warrior pathway.

The power emanated from Gardner Martin's silver armor, a

numbered Sealed Artifact bestowed by the authorities. He had acquired it in an operation a few years back, slaying two Purifiers of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church and claiming the armor from their fallen bodies.

"Number: 247.

"Name: Pride Armor.

"Danger Grade: 2. Dangerous. Use with care and moderation. It can only be applied for operations that require more than three people, or by deacons and diocesan bishops.

"Security classification: Official Purifiers and above.

"Sealing Method: Place it in a dark chamber and select physically strong humans to guard them with a rotation every three hours.

"Description: Late into the war between the Loen Kingdom and the Feysac Empire, a plethora of meteors descended from the sky, causing widespread catastrophes.

"This armor was discovered in a ruined building in the suburbs of Port LeSeur. The humans inside had met a brutal end.

"Through experimentation, it bestows upon the wearer the might of a giant. It blankets an area of 48 meters in Sunrise Gleam. These rays dispel illusions, erase shadows, and nullify invisibility effects. They also affect Wraiths and Shadows, diminishing their peculiarities and even weakening evil spirits.

"It possesses decent defensive capabilities and can be damaged but regenerates slowly. Depending on the extent of the damage, recovery can range from half an hour to a day. For detailed data, refer to Appendix 2.

"It also grants the wearer the ability to manifest a hefty, robust, yet sharp two-handed broadsword. Each strike carries a purifying effect, and dismantling the radiant broadsword results in a formidable Hurricane of Light. This phenomenon can obliterate the human body, vanquish Wraiths, and harm evil spirits.

"The wearer's combat skills see a significant boost, accompanied by heightened arrogance. They hold disdain for those standing behind them and targets concealed in the darkness or invisible.

"It indiscriminately eliminates weak humans within a 50-meter radius. Should the wearer weaken, they too become a target.

"The criteria for determining one's physique are inconsistent, sometimes very high, sometimes low. Initial findings suggest a correlation with the armor's condition and the surrounding environment. Most humans with regular exercise or those who rely on potions to enhance their physique pass the assessment without incident. For exceptions, it was later discovered they suffered from undetected serious illnesses or indulged excessively in the past two days.

"No matter who you are, caution is warranted when positioned behind this armor, though attacks don't always occur.
"Similarly, the wearer is vulnerable to its attacks when using other mystical items. Experimental results show heightened reactions when facing items from the Evernight pathway and the Earth pathway.
"The wearer of the armor eventually experiences varying degrees of betrayal, irrespective of whether they still wear the item.
"At night, this armor is very quiet, exhibiting minimal aggressiveness. However, under a moonlit sky, its demeanor becomes notably irritable, reaching maximal offensiveness.
"The highest level of experimental subjects is Sequence 5...
"Appendix 1: The wearer of the armor grows taller to varying degrees. Multiple wearings do not stack.
"Appendix 2..."
Under the influence of the Sealed Artifact, 2—247, Franca materialized.
Gardner Martin, wearing a visor, hesitated briefly before slashing with the radiant broadsword in his hand.
Simultaneously, a multitude of crimson, nearly white Fire Ravens condensed around him.
Surrounded by crimson Fire Ravens, General Philip locked eyes with the prone Anthony Reid. With a slight lift of his chin, he declared, "Accept your fate."
Anthony sensed the imminent danger but found himself powerless to resist. Trembling, memories of that haunting night flooded his mind, making it difficult to put up any resistance.
However, as he recalled General Philip's words about becoming a sacrifice, the tragic fate of his comrades, and the years of investigation, anger ignited within Anthony.
It's him!
He's the one responsible for harming my comrades, those rough but endearing individuals, and my companions who once had my back!
Suddenly, Lumian's earlier question echoed in Anthony's thoughts.
"Up to this day, do you still wrestle with the fear from that night, the sounds of sudden gunshots? Do you truly possess the courage and determination to press on?"
Anthony remembered his response:
"Perhaps I perished in that attack. What remains is an avenging spirit, relentless in its pursuit of truth and retribution.
"I can be destroyed, but I can't give up..."
That's right. I should have died long ago. My sole purpose in life is revenge. And today, my true enemy stands before me!

Why should I be afraid? I'm not even afraid of death. *Why fear gunshots, explosions, or being a sacrifice?*
Wouldn't the worst outcome be death and being sacrificed to an evil god? I was already mentally prepared!
This time, I chose to stay in Trier, not to flee from potential catastrophe but to make amends for my regrets.
Now, the opportunity has presented itself!
The flames of revenge roared within Anthony Reid's heart. He lifted his gaze to meet General Philip's slightly reddened, hatred-filled dark-brown eyes—once his superior's superior's superior.
Go to hell! Anthony cursed inwardly as he unleashed a Psychiatrist's Frenzy.
This ability could manipulate the emotions or destabilize the mental state of the target, pushing them into a frenzied state and inflicting severe mental damage.
In some cases, it could even lead the target to lose control.
Just as General Philip prepared to unleash a swarm of Fire Ravens, a surge of Danger Premonition hit him. Before he could react, the intended sacrifice raised his head, locking eyes with him, bloodshot dark-brown eyes burning with intensity.
With a buzzing sound, Philip's head snapped back, his thoughts thrown into disarray.
Ever since embracing the Goddess of Fate, originally being a Sequence 5, he, armed with the corresponding knowledge, could keenly sense shifts in his personality and thoughts. His body had undergone gradual changes as the power of the boons increased.
For Philip, mentally prepared as he was, this was acceptable. One concern nagged at him—his mental state had become unpredictable. Sometimes rational, sometimes fanatical, sometimes cold, and sometimes calm. His behavior was capricious.
It mirrored those great existences.
General Philip's mind felt like a storm had been unleashed within it. His facial skin swelled, and his pale-white hair crinkled, resembling someone submerged in water for days.
Invisible threads materialized from each pore, tinged with a faint mercurial hue, giving Philip's flesh the appearance of being ablaze with flames.
General Philip briefly succumbed to Frenzy.
At that moment, a figure materialized behind him.
It was Lumian, dressed in a partially tucked white shirt, brown pants, and oil painting-like black leather shoes.
Recognizing Franca's voice and sensing the onset of the battle, Lumian didn't immediately rush out to provide assistance. Instead,

he opted to wait for the right opportunity.
Aware that his current spirituality dictated a single optimal choice, Lumian needed to eliminate either Gardner Martin or General Philip swiftly. Franca, Jenna, and Anthony could then join forces to handle the remaining adversary.
Choosing a target was no easy decision for Lumian.
Gardner Martin, corrupted by 13 Avenue du Marché and the Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, possessed numerous peculiarities. Lumian couldn't guarantee that a combination of punches would conclusively finish him. General Philip, with his boon involving fate, might sense danger ahead of time, making Lumian's surprise attack unlikely to succeed.
Both options carried substantial risks, forcing Lumian to exercise restraint and wait patiently.
As long as Franca and Anthony remained alive for the time being, Lumian would hold back.
Patience was a fundamental quality of a Hunter, equally crucial for a Conspirer.
However, Lumian's waiting wasn't blind. Relying on Jenna's mirror magic and the shattered mirrors in the wilderness, he observed the situation closely. Prepared to intervene and save Anthony, Lumian found the opportune moment when Anthony turned the tables on Philip with a Frenzy.
This was an opportunity!
Lumian gazed at General Philip, struggling in his frenzied state, and coldly exclaimed, "Hmph!"
Two beams of white light shot out and struck Philip.
The Deceased's eyes lost focus suddenly, and his body swayed, on the brink of collapse.
Lumian had already raised his right hand, bent his pinky and ring finger, and aimed at the back of General Philip's head, mimicking a revolver.
Bang! With an added sound effect in his mind and a slight lean backward, a crimson fireball rapidly compressed and shot out from the tips of his index and middle fingers, hurtling towards the target like a bullet.

Chapter 478: The Mockery of Fate

Chapter 478 The Mockery of Fate

Bang!

The crimson fireball, unleashed from Lumian's fingertips, honed in on its target, striking General Philip's head with deadly precision. The explosion that followed resembled a cannonball's impact.

Philip's body disintegrated starting from the point of impact, as if a hammer had shattered a mirror reflecting his form.

Amidst the chaos concealed by the explosion, shards of glass scattered across the wilderness, joining the reflections of those already present.

Lumian's eyes widened as he observed the unexpected turn of events.

Does the Deceased pathway also possess Mirror Substitution?

Or does General Philip wield a mystical item from the Demoness pathway?

Such thoughts raced through Lumian's mind as he processed the scene. Philip's black-cloaked figure swiftly reappeared more than ten meters away. His eyes, once frenzied, now regained clarity.

Simultaneously, Jenna, disguised as a female mercenary, materialized from invisibility behind General Philip. She aimed her revolver at the Deceased, who had narrowly escaped the fatal attack and negative state.

To be honest, Jenna found herself in a perplexing and shocking situation.

The revelation that General Philip possessed Mirror Substitution didn't catch her off guard. However, she hadn't processed the implications before realizing he had "chosen" to position himself right before her, as if anticipating her to backstab him.

Originally, Jenna had devised a plan to exploit Lumian's clash with General Philip. Her intention was to utilize Invisibility, slip away from her hiding spot, and reach the wilderness's edge. Her goal: to assist Franca, cast a curse if Lumian's strike fell short, or create a frosty hindrance on the ground. Unexpectedly, General Philip had "escaped" to a location directly in front of her.

Such a golden opportunity couldn't be ignored!

Confused by the unfolding events, Jenna instinctively raised her right hand, aiming her revolver at the back of General Philip's head.

Though unsure of the reasons behind this bizarre turn of events, she suspected it was connected to the lucky gold coin she had received from Will.

Bang!
Jenna squeezed the trigger, and a yellow bullet, wreathed in black flames, shot out from the muzzle, hurtling toward General Philip's skull.
Meanwhile, Franca emerged from the radiant Sunrise Gleam, witnessing Anthony Reid overcoming his fear to employ his abilities on General Philip. Lumian had for some reason arrived in the vicinity, appearing mysteriously behind Philip.
Without time to dwell on her surprise, Franca swiftly raised her brass classic revolver and fired an iron-black bullet at Gardner Martin, who wielded his broadsword of light.
Her strategy was clear—unleash her full strength to stall Gardner Martin and deny him the opportunity to save General Philip!
Franca's decision to use invisibility wasn't about tapping into Assassin tactics to backstab her ex-lover. Drawing on her battle experience, she instinctively chose invisibility for a different purpose—to escape Gardner Martin and General Philip's sight, gaining a brief moment of safety.
During this fleeting period, Franca not only moved with agility but also retrieved the coin bag filled with coins. Wearing the iron-black Ring of Punishment on her left thumb and Beatrice's Necklace around her neck, she completed her ensemble.
Finally, she withdrew the Cannon Gun from her underarm holster, clasping it firmly in her palm.
In her invisible state, Franca armed herself to the teeth, entering her strongest state before the inevitable reveal.
Bang!
As the iron-black bullet sped toward Gardner Martin, Franca's diamond necklace on her chest emitted a faint glow.
Simultaneously, Franca's eyes welled up, and her red lips parted slightly, amplifying the allure of a Demoness of Pleasure.
Gardner Martin's body suddenly heated up, feeling his blood rush to his nether regions.
Scenes of his past entanglement with Franca flooded his mind, captivated by the Demoness's uncanny demeanor amidst iron and blood.
His eyes reddened, breathing grew labored, and movements visibly slowed.
Lust!
From Beatrice's Necklace and the lust of the Mother Tree of Desire pathway, coupled with the charm of a Demoness of Pleasure, it had a synergistic effect greater than the sum of its parts.
Moreover, Gardner Martin wasn't a stranger to such experiences. He had always agreed with the words in Emperor Roselle's Secret

Chronicles: "The taste of a Demoness ain't bad." In this situation, how could he control himself after tasting a Demoness?
Clang! The iron-black bullet struck Gardner Martin's chest, causing cracks in his silver armor.
Franca, not surprised that the attack hadn't worked, realized in her haste, she hadn't activated the Heavy Strike effect of the Cannon Gun.
The brass revolver, a mystical item purchased from the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, wasn't particularly potent or mystical; it had two simple abilities. The first, a normal shot, equivalent to a rifle, and the second, a Heavy Strike, akin to a small cannonball or a sniper rifle.
Franca always carried it to compensate for a Demoness's lack of offensive capabilities when she couldn't use a curse. The Cannon Gun's negative effects were minimal—if all six rounds were not fired in a day or maintained every other week, rare situations like chamber explosions or misfires could occur.
Observing Gardner Martin's infatuated gaze behind the visor, Franca hesitated before using her right thumb to pull back the Cannon Gun's hammer, signaling the activation of the Heavy Strike effect.
Bang!
As Franca moved, she pulled the trigger at Gardner Martin, who lunged at her as if seeking a mate.
The iron-black bullet collided with him, accompanied by blazing flames.
Almost simultaneously, Franca sensed an anomaly in the Primordial Demoness figurine casually stuffed into her pocket.
Not only did it turn cold again, like ice, but it also trembled slightly.
Dammit! *Why is it you again?* Are you done!? Franca, feeling both angry and cautious, pulled the trigger and threw the palm-sized bone figurine far away.
Simultaneously, on the other side, Jenna's bullet, fired from an ordinary revolver, pierced the back of General Philip's head with black flames. Unsurprisingly, the Deceased shattered like a mirror, his figure outlined at the edge of the Sunrise Gleam created by Gardner Martin.
At that moment, as Franca hurled the Primordial Demoness's bone figurine, General Philip's body froze.
Black flames erupted, silently igniting his Spirit Body. Cold frost swiftly condensed, enveloping him.
Blood seeped from his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears, emitting a series of cracking sounds.

The mirror he carried appeared to have shattered.
He was clearly in a daze, as if he had been cursed.
Without hesitation, Lumian employed Spirit World Traversal once more, emerging from behind General Philip.
Meanwhile, Anthony Reid had stood up, his expression no longer filled with fear but focused hatred.
As Philip was not far from him, on the edge of the clear Sunrise Gleam, he ran towards the general—his mortal enemy.
Philip's figure reflected in his eyes, and he couldn't help but smile.
His pupils turned vertical, tinged with a faint golden hue.
This time, he refrained from employing Frenzy, fearing it might cause General Philip to lose control and transform, giving Gardner Martin an opportunity to kill his team.
He chose Awe, also known as Dragon Might!
General Philip trembled.
Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have succumbed to such a severe Awe. At most, he would have experienced temporary fear. However, he was in a dire state, influenced by an unknown force, betrayed by an item on him. Consequently, his entire being fell into a blank state.
Observing this, Lumian refrained from using the Spell of Harrumph. His right hand took the shape of a revolver again, aimed at the back of General Philip's head, and fired a crimson fireball that was nearly white from his fingertips.
Philip was jolted awake by a tangible premonition of danger, only to witness his impending demise.
A wave of indignation washed over him.
Despite being stronger, possessing lethal strikes, and an array of mystical abilities, he suffered a relentless beating without a chance to retaliate. He didn't even have an opportunity to fight back before Death knocked on his door.
In his eyes, countless fates interwove into a net, constantly changing, as if mocking him.
This made him feel like a clown.
Bang!
General Philip's head exploded from Lumian's crimson, nearly white fireball. Numerous skull fragments splattered with charred marks, red blood, and milky-white brain matter.
The Deceased's lifeless body thudded to the ground, and an item rolled out of the hidden pocket of the black cloak.
It was a pitch-black figurine, palm-sized and resembling a beautiful woman. Long snake-like hair cascaded to its feet, and it had eyes of various forms at the top.
Wh— Lumian's gaze instinctively shifted to the Primordial

Demoness figurine that Franca had thrown out.
Similar to the one on General Philip, one was pure white, while the other was pitch-black.
Suddenly, Lumian grasped why General Philip had Mirror Substitution and why he had appeared directly in front of Jenna, who was invisible.
With the special Primordial Demoness figurine, he naturally converged with Demonesses!
Subsequently, Franca's official Primordial Demoness figurine resonated with the pitch-black one, causing an abnormality that led to General Philip being "cursed" by the item at a critical moment.
The pitch-black Primordial Demoness figurine was likely the item Gardner Martin had smuggled into Trier through "Rat" Christo's smuggling caravan!

Chapter 479: Matching Items

Chapter 479 Matching Items

Bang!

The jet-black bullet, ablaze with fiery fury, slammed into Gardner Martin, who was gripped by desire, dead center in his gleaming silver armor once again.

It hit him like a battering ram, sending shockwaves through his frame.

A web of fractures sprawled out from the impact zone, causing Gardner Martin's advance to stagger, forcing him to lean backward.

This abrupt jolt snapped him out of his reverie. He witnessed General Philip, wreathed in black flames and encased in frost, while Lumian materialized behind the Deceased. Lumian's right hand acted as a revolver, launching a crimson fireball straight at the back of Philip's head.

Behind Gardner Martin's mask, his pupils dilated, and a shiver raced down his spine, as if an icy cascade had been dumped over him.

This abrupt awakening effectively quelled his desires. Without hesitation, he dropped to one knee and drove the hefty broadsword into the wilderness.

The broadsword shattered, breaking into myriad fragments of light that swept toward Franca, Lumian, and the others, including the lifeless form of General Philip.

Amidst a resounding crack, Franca, constantly shifting positions, remained enveloped by the Hurricane of Light, her body fracturing like a shattered mirror.

Lumian and Jenna met the same fate. Only Anthony Reid, lacking Mirror Substitution, instinctively lunged to the ground, curling up to shield his vital parts.

The luminous tempest rapidly dissipated before Lumian and his companions outlined themselves on the outskirts of the wilderness, facing the pale-black stone bricks.

They witnessed a brilliant white flaming spear hurtling towards the distant majestic city, covering more than a hundred meters in the blink of an eye.

As soon as the fiery-spear materialized upon impact with the ground, Gardner Martin, draped in silver armor, rose again, directing his focus towards the city veiled in a thin fog.

After several consecutive attempts, Gardner Martin distanced himself from Franca and the others, sprinting towards the dilapidated structures at the city's periphery.

Lumian chose not to pursue him. Instead, he sprinted to the edge of the Sunrise Gleam to check on Anthony Reid.
The Psychiatrist's body bore a multitude of bloody wounds, with the most severe on the left side of his back, revealing a glimpse of his beating heart.
Lying on his side, curled up and bloodied, Anthony Reid forced a smile upon seeing Lumian.
There was no fear of death in that smile—only relief, relaxation, and satisfaction.
The taste of revenge was indeed sweet.
Observing Anthony Reid's lips moving as if he intended to entrust something, Lumian scoffed and remarked, "Do you wish to utter your final words? Do you want us to dispatch your belongings to your home on the West Midseashire Coast?"
As he spoke, Lumian retrieved a silver earring, securing it to his left earlobe.
Squatting down, he pressed his left hand against the gaping wound on Anthony's back.
Abruptly, his palm slid upward, and the gruesome wound shifted to Anthony's shoulder.
In the blink of an eye, the most critical injury on Anthony's body vanished, leaving him as good as new. However, the initially minor wounds on his shoulder deepened, revealing white bones and causing blood to seep out.
This was Lie's Damage Transfer, capable of addressing one wound at a time.
Anthony was taken aback, feeling as if life had been restored to him.
Though the pain persisted, and his body weakened, at least the specter of imminent death had dissipated.
Then, Jenna approached, placing him in a supine position.
With a swift pfft, Jenna thrust an obsidian arrow into Anthony's chest.
The Arrow of the Bloodthirsty promptly absorbed the blood, turning Anthony's pupils red. The invisible flames in the sky seemed a bit blinding, and the scent of blood in the air proved enticing.
Simultaneously, the smaller wounds on his body swiftly healed, and the more severe ones showed significant improvement. In a matter of minutes, they should close up on their own, ceasing to impede his movements.
Anthony Reid, teetering on the edge of death, stood up, bewildered, examining his body with disbelief.
I've nearly recovered? I'm alright just like that? As a Spectator, his

emotions visibly fluctuated.
"Not a bad combination," Franca praised. "As long as you don't perish on the spot and refrain from losing control and transforming into a monster, there's still a chance to save you. At most, you'll become weakened."
Lie's Damage Transfer, coupled with the formidable self-healing abilities bestowed by the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty, produced such a remarkable effect.
Franca turned her gaze to Lumian, questioning, "I thought you'd intercept Gardner Martin."
In that critical moment, the others couldn't match Gardner Martin's speed as he fled. Only Lumian, capable of Spirit World Traversal, had the potential to catch up and effectively hinder him.
"Do you think I didn't want to?" Lumian retorted, a note of mockery in his tone.
However, he lacked the ability!
Had he not been affected by Voisin Sanson's Circle Inhabitant during his first "teleportation" today, returning him to his original spot without expending his spirituality, Lumian wouldn't have maintained a stable state. He wouldn't even have been able to use Lie for Damage Transfer. He would have had to rely on Franca or Jenna. How could he possibly have caught up to Gardner Martin?
Franca instantly grasped Lumian's meaning—he had engaged in battles before and after entering this place, and his spirituality was on the verge of depletion.
"Alright." Franca shifted her attention to the two Primordial Demoness figurines, one black and one white, lying undisturbed on the ground, untouched by the Hurricane of Light. Frowning, she inquired, "Where should I toss these two?"
Them constantly causing abnormalities seemed like a scam!
"Take them with you." Lumian considered for a moment before smiling. "If it weren't for them, how could we have dispatched General Philip so effortlessly? We might need them to escape in the future. Yes, we can't entrust both to one person. You take one, and Jenna will take the other."
After a brief pause, Franca responded, "I'll still take the white one."
As a member of the Demoness Sect, holding the orthodox Primordial Demoness figurine was only natural.
Observing Jenna pick up the pitch-black Primordial Demoness figurine, Franca muttered in confusion, "Why is there such a figurine? According to the Purifiers' dossier and information from other secret organizations, members of the Demoness Sect only carry bone figurines. There's nothing that's so black."
While Franca spoke, she scrutinized the charred Primordial

Demoness bone figurine, comparing it with her own.
Soon, she discerned differences in the details.
Aside from the stark white and pitch-black hues, the eyes at the tips of the Primordial Demoness's snake-like hair faced different directions. If one looked left, the other would undoubtedly look right.
"Like a mirror image, mirror... Is this the Primordial Demoness in the mirror?" Franca ventured a guess, amalgamating the abilities and traits of the Demoness pathway with her experience in the peculiar mirror world. "This shouldn't be possible under normal circumstances. It wouldn't be easy for the Iron and Blood Cross Order to find such a figurine..."
She now comprehended the reason behind their encounters with Gardner Martin and General Philip.
This was a manifestation of the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence. Except for Anthony, an unwitting Psychiatrist brought in by his companion, everyone present was either a Hunter or a Demoness.
Furthermore, Franca and Anthony had entered through the same method as General Philip. They would inevitably emerge at the edge of this wilderness, teeming with mirror fragments.
Primordial Demoness in the mirror... Lumian found the description ominous.
Without delay, he addressed Franca and the others, "Search General Philip's corpse and help me guard the surroundings. I'll set up a ritual to restore my spirituality."
Jenna expressed surprise. "There's a ritual that can restore spirituality?"
Her gaze naturally swept over General Philip's corpse, realizing it had been split into five or six pieces, each a gruesome mess.
The Beyonder characteristics had yet to emerge at that moment. The boon from the evil god couldn't return to its source, slowly sinking back into the lifeless form.
Lumian entered a dimly lit area with grayish-white stone pillars, found cover, and swiftly set up the altar. Franca could surmise who he was praying to, so she joined him to guard against any unforeseen incidents.
Jenna contemplated for a few seconds before approaching the altar. Retrieving the lucky gold coin, she said to Lumian, "This is the lucky gold coin that the boy gave me. I don't know if it's useful when given to others, but there's no harm in trying."
She delegated the task of searching the corpse to Anthony Reid, who was rapidly recovering.
Franca observed in silence for a moment before affirming, "True."

Lumian didn't hesitate. After all, Will had a close connection to the Tarot Club. Even if the lucky gold coin couldn't be lent to others, it wouldn't bring about any negative effects.
Placing the Loen gold pound on the altar, Lumian conjured a wall of spirituality, ignited all the candles, and took two steps back.
Rather than proceeding with the boon-seeking ritual, he attempted to recite Mr. Fool's honorific name.
"The Fool that doesn't belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck..."
As Hermes reverberated, the lucky gold coin on the altar illuminated. A thin gray fog emanated from the wall of spirituality, enveloping the wilderness's periphery.
The fog in the distant majestic city appeared to thicken.
Before long, just as Lumian began praying for a boon, a frenzied and terrifying roar echoed from the area where the weather was chaotic and faint giant figures lingered.
Despite the thin gray fog, the four of them felt dizzy. The blood in their bodies raced, and their hearts pounded.
"It's truly useful. It's genuinely lucky..." Lumian gazed at the dazzling golden coin on the altar, sighing sincerely.
Had it not been for the ritual and Mr. Fool's gray fog's protection, the roar could have inflicted severe damage, especially considering Lumian's nearly depleted spirituality. He might have lost control, putting Anthony Reid, still recovering from severe injuries, in jeopardy.
Phew... Lumian exhaled and continued to recite in a deep voice under the watchful eyes of Franca and Jenna, "Power of Inevitability!
"You are the past, the present, and the future;
"You are the cause, the effect, and the process..."

Chapter 480: Ascetic

Chapter 480 Ascetic

Amidst the frenzied and terrifying roars, a hurricane tore through the abnormally chaotic weather, shrouding the scene in smoke, flames, lightning, and hail. It spiraled into the sky, merging with the silent inferno.

Not far from the apocalypse-like hurricane, two figures felt the impact of the roar simultaneously. One's head tilted back slightly, as if punched, while the other's wrinkles quivered, and his eyes grew sharper.

The former was the man who had originally stood behind Olson, vice president of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, Tony Twain. The latter was aged, donning a blue military suit with a sash and medals. His neatly combed back dark-red hair identified him as the mysterious president of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, known as Diest.

Diest shifted his gaze from the hurricane to Tony Twain.

"The chance to become a Conqueror is before us. If I can seize it, I'll find a way to separate the Weather Warlock's Beyonder characteristic and bestow it upon you."

As Tony Twain observed the violent hurricane, lightning, and torrential rain, his light-blue eyes hinted at mockery.

"Can we really succeed? A Weather Warlock has already joined. Even if Vermonda Sauron loses control and transforms into a monster, he's still a Sequence 1 monster."

Tony Twain's words showed no respect for a Sequence 2 Weather Warlock or a Sequence 1 Conqueror, despite not being an Angel yet.

Diest's expression remained unchanged, and his aura surged.

With his military attire, he resembled the commander-in-chief of all armies.

"Elsewhere, we'll surely fail. Even without interference, we'll need to embark on a lengthy hunt to stand a chance against the out-of-control Vermonda Sauron. But here..." Diest spoke in a deep voice, "We can harness that power for a brief period."

As he finished speaking, the area between his brows turned red, as if something sought to emerge.

Simultaneously, Diest retrieved a coin pouch from his waist, concealed beneath his suit.

Filled with soybeans and a few palm-sized iron soldiers, Diest grabbed them and tossed them forward.

Amidst the howling wind, the iron soldiers sprang to life and expanded. The soybeans swelled rapidly, transforming into giants with blurred faces and yellowish skin, as if soaked in water.

Failing to bring his team here in time, Diest abruptly transformed into a blazing dark-red, nearly purple flame, engulfing the newly created soldiers.
A beam of light shot up, tearing through the sky and homing in on the giant figure within the hurricane.
...
At the edge of the magnificent city veiled in a thin gray fog, Gardner Martin removed his helmet. His breastplate bore web-like cracks, revealing blood-stained clothes beneath.
With one hand pressed against his head, he staggered forward, intermittently emitting crimson flames bordering on white.
The terrifying roar had clearly taken its toll.
Navigating through the ruins, Gardner Martin quickly approached the thin gray fog. Half-collapsed asymmetrical buildings stood within, seemingly frozen in time, struck by a devastating blow and sunk into the ground.
Abruptly halting, Gardner Martin glanced to the side and asked in a deep voice, "Who is it?"
Amidst the sound of gravel tumbling, Olson, resembling a hungry bear, emerged from behind a collapsed black building, carrying a small brown suitcase.
The Supervisor, sporting a half top hat, yellow vest, and black suit, looked at Gardner Martin and said, "I didn't know who was coming, so I hid for a while. Where's Philip?"
Gardner Martin breathed a sigh of relief and replied, "We encountered Lumian Lee and his team. They killed Philip. I was injured and barely managed to escape."
Olson, with his thick beard, didn't delve into the details of the battle and sized up Gardner Martin. "You're quite beaten up."
Gardner Martin chuckled, saying,
"Fortunately, I had Pride Armor to shield me from most of the damage. Yeah, I blame it mainly on the angelic roar; it affected me to a certain extent. Fortunately, I was relatively far away, so the problem isn't that serious. Look, even the Pride Armor hasn't attacked me, indicating that I haven't weakened."
"That's good. Let's enter Fourth Epoch Trier now," Supervisor Olson nodded with an indifferent expression.
Gardner Martin turned around, clutching the silver helmet with one arm, and walked towards the thin gray fog not far away.
Olson carried a small brown suitcase and trailed behind the Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order.
As the two advanced, Olson's eyes suddenly turned fierce and vicious.
You'd used 'fortunately' twice... You've already taken off the Pride

Armor's helmet... Olson muttered silently to himself, his brownish-red eyes reflecting Gardner Martin's staggering figure in the silver armor.
...
At the edge of the wilderness, scattered with mirror fragments, Franca and Jenna couldn't hear the chants emanating from the wall of spirituality, but they observed the grayish-white stone pillar and two candles of the same color mysteriously softening. Fist-sized candle flames flickered in silver-white and black, while an illusory pewter-black liquid oozed from Lumian's chest, enveloping him.
As Lumian curled up on the ground, occasionally rolling, Franca sighed softly and remarked, "It looks painful..."
This likely marked Ciel's fourth encounter with such an ordeal.
"That's right." Despite standing outside the wall of spirituality, Jenna felt an inexplicable fear, goosebumps forming on her skin.
While she had witnessed Ciel's mental pain and confusion, this was her first time witnessing such intense physical suffering.
Franca spoke sincerely, "If Ciel were to switch to the Affliction potion now, he wouldn't have to worry about not reaching Sequence 4. It's too compatible!"
Sequence 5 of the Assassin pathway was known as Affliction or the Demoness of Affliction.
After another terrifying roar, the silver-black illusory liquid beads on Lumian's body seeped into him. His expression gradually relaxed, and his body ceased its curled-up state.
He lay sprawled beside the collapsed grayish-white stone pillar, reluctant to move for a few seconds.
While his spirituality had recovered and even increased, his body and mind were visibly exhausted. It was akin to the sensation one experienced after completing an exceptionally challenging task in their most focused state.
Lumian, aware of the urgency, forced himself to his feet.
He noticed that the silver-black candle flame had returned to normal, and the surrounding gray fog was gradually dissipating.
His plan to rely on the gray fog's protection against the terrifying roar had failed before implementation.
Mr. Fool's response had a time limit!
Furthermore, he had to consider the interference of the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings.
As Lumian swiftly tidied up the altar, he scrutinized his transformation:
The improvement in spirituality was evident with the Ascetic boon. Lumian believed that even after using the Spell of Harrumph

a few times, he could complete nearly eight Spirit World Traversals.
Ascetic had also enhanced his endurance, making him more adaptable to extreme weather. Even if he encountered frost, he wouldn't be frozen. Similarly, he found himself better at enduring emotions and desires. While he still felt them, he could endure many things.
This extended to an Ascetic's core ability, Compression. It could be used for the mind and also produced positive effects in the physical and mystic domains.
The former involved emotions and desires, which were mostly tolerated. They didn't completely disappear but were suppressed. At critical points, they needed to be vented or relieved, or psychological problems could arise. The Compression ability could accumulate these emotions and desires and erupt at critical moments for the desired effect. For Lumian, the negative effects of the Contractee's three abilities and the corresponding effects of mystical items on him were more bearable. However, he needed to regularly break an enemy's neck as a way to vent.
The latter aspect referred to spirituality, strength, and ritual steps. Through Compression, Lumian could compress and store spirituality and strength beyond the average person when he had nothing to do, releasing them when needed. This allowed his spirituality to recover once and temporarily enlarge him. His strength, speed, and agility were sufficient to withstand a Sequence 6 Dawn Paladin of the Warrior pathway for a minute or two. Additionally, the accumulation of ritual steps enabled Lumian to use abilities like the Animal Creation Spell and the Exorcism Spell in actual combat.
Furthermore, after becoming an Ascetic, Lumian's previous boons had been enhanced. For instance, the number of contract abilities he could withstand had increased to three, although he didn't want to maximize them. He preferred choosing one or two suitable ones, as too many contracts brought too many negative effects. Even Ascetics would suffer because of them, as evidenced by negative examples like Guillaume Bénet and Bouvard.
Of course, this wasn't an immediate concern, as summoning creatures from the spirit world was impossible in this location.
Lumian swiftly stashed away the items and dispelled the wall of spirituality. Handing back the fortunate gold coin to Jenna, he spoke in a low, commanding tone, "Let's make our way to Fourth Epoch Trier."
"Huh?" Jenna was bewildered.
Ciel had warned them to steer clear of the giant and the grand

city!
Franca looked back with contemplation and said, "Do you suspect that the fog shrouding the city belongs to Mr. Fool? Entering might provide some protection. We won't have to worry about getting taken out by that lunatic's roar or succumbing to the risk of transforming into a monster?"
"Yes, it's dangerous, but there's a chance for us to defend ourselves and await further developments." Lumian inferred that the same fog enshrouded Fourth Epoch Trier, drawing from the fog around the Samaritan Women's Spring and the lingering shadows of significant figures from the Fourth Epoch.
It emanated from Mr. Fool's powers!
Franca wasted no time and nodded decisively. "Okay."
Jenna chose to trust her two companions without delving into questions.
At that moment, Anthony Reid had finished clearing the battlefield and approached with the spoils.

Chapter 481: The Thing in the Suitcase

Anthony Reid clutched the items salvaged from General Philip's lifeless form, wrapping them in a torn cloak. He avoided direct contact, a cautious move as he moved forward.

"Found these..." he began to explain, but Lumian swiftly cut him off.

Clear and rapid, Lumian outlined their plan, "We're heading to the outskirts of the city enveloped by the gray fog. Want to come with us?"

Anthony Reid's eyelids twitched. "Okay."

He knew going solo could mean a swift demise, especially if the terrifying roar echoed again.

Lumian wasn't in a hurry to inquire about General Philip's belongings. Gripping Jenna and Anthony, he signaled Franca to hold onto his collar.

A dark light emanated from the black mark on his shoulder as the quartet disappeared, seemingly teleporting to the periphery of the majestic yet crumbling city, just before the thin gray fog.

What they saw was where they arrived.

Lumian attempted to step into the gray fog, but the seal on his chest remained dormant.

Franca and the others could traverse it without his guidance.

...

Resembling a hungry bear, Olson fixed his gaze on Gardner Martin's head, devoid of its helmet. His brownish-red eyes flickered with a sinister light, pinpointing Martin's vulnerability.

In mere seconds, Olson identified Martin's weakest spot.

Even if he couldn't deal a fatal blow, inflicting damage to the party again meant a high chance that the Pride Armor would betray its wearer and kill him!

Silently, Olson reached into his pocket, retrieving a yellow bullet held between his thumb and index finger.

A crimson, nearly white fireball rapidly condensed in his palm, leading to a controlled explosion.

The violent shockwave propelled the bullet towards the back of Gardner Martin's head with a thunderous boom.

Gardner Martin staggered, narrowly avoiding the bullet.

Nearly simultaneously, the surroundings were bathed in the bright and holy Sunrise Gleam.

Black smoke billowed from Olson's body as if a long-dead zombie had been exposed to the sunlight created by the Purifiers.

Instinctively, Olson's eyes closed against the intense light.

Meanwhile, Gardner Martin, no longer feeble, donned his helmet

with a cold expression and sharp eyes.
He ignited, transforming into a blazing white spear of flames, piercing Supervisor Olson's forehead with a whoosh.
Despite Olson's formidable resistance to scorching flames, his skull suffered charring from the impact. As the flames dissipated, Gardner Martin's figure detached from the burning spear. Clenching his silver-armored fist, he swung it at Olson's head from midair.
As the flames dissipated, Gardner Martin's figure detached from the burning spear. Clenching his silver-armored fist, he swung it at Olson's head from midair.
Olson's neck snapped, and his head flew up, dragging along a bloody spine.
Gardner Martin's skull-crushing punch missed, and he landed on the ground once again.
However, a heavy and sharp broadsword of light materialized in his other hand at some point, ready for the next phase of the battle.
Gardner Martin thrust the broadsword into the blackened soil, unleashing a terrifying storm. Countless light fragments filled the air, creating chaos in the vicinity.
The Pride Armor swiftly condensed the Sword of Dawn again, the Hurricane of Light forming with a much shorter interval than an ordinary Sequence 6 Dawn Paladin. Only a minute or two had passed since Gardner Martin last wielded this formidable power.
Olson, reduced to just his head with a brownish-red beard, showed focus in his eyes and attempted to merge with a burning-white spear for a hasty retreat.
However, the storm arrived, its light engulfing him completely.
As the Hurricane of Light subsided, Olson's body displayed severe damage, riddled with cracks, some piercing through his chest and tearing internal organs. His severed head, carried by a bloody spine, bore the marks of destruction—eyes and nose obliterated, skull cracked, and blackened brain exposed.
Gardner Martin, poised and composed, conjured ten to twenty crimson fireballs.
They darted toward Olson's nearly unconscious head, triggering a resounding explosion that shattered the head into fragments and liquid, splattering on the ground.
With a chuckle, Gardner Martin raised his visor, surveying Olson's headless corpse and the scattered skull. He remarked, "I've always found you a little odd. This was a good opportunity to test you. I didn't expect you to really attack me. That's good too. Not only have I eliminated a hidden danger, but I've also counteracted the

traitorous curse of the Pride Armor."
Deliberately appearing fine while exposing some problems through the details was meant to bait Olson—simple acts of vulnerability could easily raise the other party's vigilance and suspicion.
With a sigh, Gardner approached the battered suitcase that had fallen to the ground and lifted it, on the verge of shattering.
He had long been curious about its contents, as Olson had always evaded the question. Now, Gardner could finally open it himself.
Gardner Martin unlatched the suitcase and opened it in front of him.
Inside was a head.
The features were unmistakable—deep facial features, brownish-red eyes, slightly disheveled black hair, a few silver strands at the temples, and well-defined facial features. The head which wasn't considered thin was stained with blood.
It was Gardner Martin!
It was Gardner Martin's own head!
...
Once Lumian and his companions traversed the outermost gray fog, the transition from morning to evening seemed to unfold before them. Darkness enveloped their vision, concealing the black asymmetrical buildings and houses that appeared as if splattered with blood. Everything silently melded into the obscurity.
As they advanced, the looming, half-collapsed palace drew nearer. The city bore the brunt of colossal damage, as if a giant had delivered a devastating blow, unleashing shockwaves that wreaked havoc on the surroundings.
Details eluded Lumian's scrutiny. The lack of sufficient light and the considerable distance obscured the exact nature of the scene. Various houses obstructed their view, and only the excessively tall palace and surrounding structures, despite their partial collapse, allowed them a glimpse of the peripheral city.
"Let's find a nearby hiding spot," Franca suggested, her gaze scanning the area. She had no intention of venturing deeper into Fourth Epoch Trier.
The quartet found themselves on a narrow street, where the houses on both sides were so close that occupants could almost shake hands by extending their arms.
The structures, resembling victims of a violent earthquake, teetered but refused to collapse, adorned with ghastly cracks.
Jenna's attention fixated on a relatively intact house. Iron-black in color, it featured an arched window on the left and a square on the right. Dark-red graffiti adorned one side, while the other remained clean. Not a single weed grew between the rocks.

Apart from the two obvious pots, the house exhibited various asymmetrical details, with centipede-like cracks mainly concentrated on the lower left side.
"Should we go there?" Jenna inquired.
Lumian shook his head.
"The more intact, the higher the likelihood of abnormalities. The current state of Fourth Epoch Trier's citizens is unknown.
"Let's find a completely collapsed building to hide behind. At least, everything inside should be buried."
"Agreed," Franca concurred with Lumian's decision.
In Fourth Epoch Trier, she couldn't fully perform Magic Mirror Divination.
Lumian and his team swiftly reached the center of the dimly lit street. In a setting that could plunge into darkness at any given moment, they strategically maneuvered around the ruins of a dark-red building, seeking cover.
It wasn't until now that Anthony Reid seized an opportunity to extract the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty from his chest, returning it to Jenna.
With the dark-stained black cloak spread on the ground, he showcased his findings.
There were three items in total:
The first, a blackened ulna punctuated by dark-red holes, resembling a rough bone flute that had been kept in storage for ages.
The second, a small wooden box painted in dark hues. Compact enough to fit into a concealed pocket, it featured large holes on both sides veiled by swaying, leather-like "curtains."
Lastly, a collection of gold, silver, and copper coins.
Anthony Reid gestured toward the "bone flute" and explained, "This formed from the convergence of light spots on Philip's ulna. It seems something formless has settled on it."
Conspirer or Reaper Beyonder characteristic combined with his ulna and the power of the Deceased boon? Lumian nodded indiscernibly.
Philip hadn't had a chance to retaliate before, leaving him uncertain about the general's Sequence—a Sequence 6 Conspirer or a Sequence 5 Reaper. What was clear, however, was the general's affiliation with the Hunter pathway. This deduction was based on the creation of numerous crimson Fire Ravens, almost white in hue. Moreover, the general wasn't just a Sequence 7.
If it were the latter, Lumian would have been pleased to obtain the main ingredient for his advancement. The issue lay in the mixture of the power with an evil god's boon, rendering it unsuitable for

direct use in potion concoction.
"What settled on it is the corruption of an evil god. It was a wise choice not to touch it directly," Lumian informed Anthony.
Within the underground seal, the power of an evil god's boon couldn't return to its source.
"This was found on Philip's body..." Anthony pointed at the dark wooden box. Before he could finish speaking, another frenzied and violent roar echoed from afar.
This time, the four of them, having entered the gray fog, only experienced a slight dizziness and remained unaffected.

Chapter 482: Bodies Chasing Heads

Franca shook off the dizziness induced by the terrifying roar and sighed from the bottom of her heart.

"As expected, the gray fog here provides protection."

Without it, facing a roar that could harm their Spirit Body and affect their minds would result in losing control, turning into monsters, or immediate death.

"Praise The Fool!" Lumian openly expressed his faith.

He then reminded her in an icy tone, "But the hidden dangers here might be more terrifying than the previous roar."

Franca fell silent for a few seconds before speaking in an encouraging tone, "Hidden dangers are preferable to those that have already surfaced. Let's avoid triggering them. If nothing else occurs, we'll stay in this corner and wait for help!"

While Jenna and Anthony Reid harbored doubts about the strategy of passivity, they hesitated to venture deep into Fourth Epoch Trier and reluctantly accepted the plan that wasn't really a plan.

In the eerie silence, Anthony was the first to regain composure. He pointed at the dark wooden box and stated, "I'm not sure of its purpose. A simple, temporary touch doesn't seem to have any obvious negative effects."

As for the coins, their significance was apparent. A quick glance and rough calculation revealed a total of 312 verl d'or and 26 coppet.

Franca leaned against a collapsed pillar in the shadows, her eyes fixed on the mysterious dark wooden box. "What the hell is this thing?"

It was obviously no ordinary container; its appearance suggested it held some kind of mysterious power.

Lumian and Anthony turned their attention to the Demoness of Pleasure simultaneously.

Lumian chuckled, "I should be the one asking you that."

Franca exclaimed, "There was nothing I could do. I couldn't spare time for spirit channeling, and this place isn't connected to the real spirit world. I can't perform Magic Mirror Divination. To understand the abilities, effects, state, and potential drawbacks of these two items, I'll have to experiment with them myself repeatedly.

"Of course, if we encounter an Artisan, many of our problems might be solved."

She gestured towards Jenna, saying, "Just like the black Primordial Demoness figurine, it undoubtedly has other functions. For instance, it allows the holder to create Mirror Substitution. As for mine, apart from providing a certain anti-divination and early

warning effect, it can only be used as a supplicant during rituals.
"They're both figurines, differing only in color and orientation. Why such a significant disparity?"
Franca avoided mentioning why she didn't employ various methods to gather information about the black Primordial Demoness figurine. The unspoken understanding among the group was clear—in their current situation, ensuring their safety took precedence over risking injury or adverse effects to test their spoils of war. Any mishap could lead to dire consequences, potentially even death in the experiment.
As a heavy silence settled among Jenna and the others, Franca sighed inwardly.
The black figurine clearly is problematic, and its mysterious origin is intriguing. It explains why the Demoness Sect wants me to investigate what Gardner had smuggled in through the underground tunnels...
If I hand it over, will the Demoness Sect reward me with the Affliction potion and pledge assistance for my ritual, or will they choose to silence me?
Lumian stroked his chin, addressing Anthony Reid, "In that case, keep the verl d'or. We'll distribute the remaining spoils of war when we return to the surface."
Anthony inquired further, "Should we wrap it in a cloak and place it on the ground before taking it when we leave?"
Lumian smiled and gestured at the charred bone flute,
"Otherwise? You can also carry it with you. This way, we might witness the abilities of a Deceased. Philip died in a hurry and didn't have time to show us.
"Of course, judging from his condition at the time of death, the holder of the item will most likely be the recipient of those abilities in the form of a curse."
Anthony, unfazed by the mockery, pulled up the blood-stained and tattered black cloak, wrapping it around the bone flute and the small wooden box once more.
Lumian, with a thoughtful expression, poked his head out and looked at the abnormally narrow street.
"If we encounter an enemy we find challenging to handle later, we can consider throwing these two items to him. It might have a miraculous effect. General Philip will be very pleased to know that he would still be of use after death."
It might bring about a curse of fate!
Despite the tense atmosphere, Lumian's constant mockery of General Philip brought a slight amusement to Jenna.
"Dammit, General Philip is already dead. There's no need to harp

on about him."
Before Lumian could respond to Jenna, two tragic screams pierced the air.
The cries emanated from the same location, filled with undisguised fear.
Soon after, two figures rushed into the narrow street, as if pursuing an unidentified flying object hovering in the air.
Franca, alongside Lumian, peered out of the shadows, her expression freezing at the sight.
The two figures, a man and a woman, were decapitated, their necks mangled, devoid of any signs of bones.
Chasing them were two heads, displaying pure fear and dragging bloody, tail-like spines behind them.
One head belonged to a man with puffed-up cheeks resembling a squirrel. He chewed on long, thick black hair that emerged from his dark brown eyes, nostrils, and ears. Similar hair grew from the headless body chasing him, denser and more exaggerated, resembling seaweed.
The other head belonged to a beautiful woman with black hair and brown eyes. She flew forward frantically, coughing and shaking out resplendent starlight. Gravel in the surroundings, sent flying by the pursuit, swayed as if in slow motion.
Suddenly, the two heads and bodies, about to climb over a collapsed building and exit the narrow street, froze.
The heads shook in confusion, attempting to dispel a discomfort.
The headless corpses raised their hands, clutching their left chests.
In mere seconds, the two heads, with bloody spines trailing behind them, plummeted into the collapsed black house, their bodies crashing onto the stacked rocks.
A heavy silence fell upon Lumian and the others.
After a few seconds, Lumian scoffed, "See, this is what happens when you venture deep into Fourth Epoch Trier."
"Do you suspect they're residents of the Hostel?" Jenna inquired thoughtfully.
Lumian replied with a smirk, "Otherwise? "Where else could you find such fresh heads and bodies in an ancient ruin that's been buried for a millennium or two?"
This brought back memories of Supervisor Olson. He had been in this state when he first appeared.
Now, Lumian was almost certain that Olson was a true monster, with a head and body that could be separated.
Franca also recalled Gardner Martin's servants. She withdrew her gaze and pondered for a moment before stating,
"Why do bodiless heads still cough, as if they're sick...? What

happened to them at the end seems like a cerebral infarction. The two headless bodies show signs of cardiac arrest.
"Is this the work of the Sick Church's evil god's bestowed, or is there another murderer?
"Right, a Sequence 5 of the Demoness pathway is called Affliction. It can spread various illnesses, and I can enter this place with the Primordial Demoness figurine and the ancient silver mirror...
"This place clearly has a lot to do with the Demoness pathway. Could the high-level power leaking out cause monsters to fall ill and die?"
"Not bad. You still have some intelligence at critical moments," Lumian praised mockingly.
Jenna, on the other hand, rejoiced.
"Fortunately, we didn't venture too deep. Otherwise, who knows when we'd fall ill and die."
Lumian smiled at her.
"Why do you think we're not currently surrounded by disease?"
"B-but we didn't cough..." Jenna's voice trailed off as she glanced at the hidden pocket of her clothes.
Inside was the pitch-black Primordial Demoness figurine.
Franca also peered into her pocket, as if she could discern the bone-carved Primordial Demoness figurine through the fabric.
Anthony turned to Lumian and sought confirmation,
"Are you suggesting that the Fourth Epoch's Trier is plagued with illnesses, and we're unharmed because we're carrying the two figurines?"
Lumian spread his hands and said,
"I believe this explanation makes more sense."
...
Beyond the gray fog, at the edge of the Fourth Epoch's Trier ruins.
In the small brown suitcase, Gardner Martin's blood-stained face suddenly opened, revealing Gardner Martin clad in silver armor, reflected in its eyes.
It opened its mouth and expelled a blazing white fireball.
The distance between them was so close that Gardner Martin couldn't dodge at all. All he could do was lean back, attempting to avoid the target's initial attack.
Boom! Gardner Martin was sent flying by the massive explosion.
The spiderweb-like crack on the chest of the silver armor shattered, tearing through the skin and flesh below.
This strike was akin to hitting Gardner Martin's vital points. Had it not been for the Pride Armor, which absorbed most of the damage, he would have perished on the spot.
However, this meant that the Pride Armor lost its protection over

the chest for a period.
Gardner Martin's bloodied head flew up, dragging along a bloody spine.
On the other side, Olson's headless corpse stood up once more.
Gardner Martin's head aimed for the empty neck stump and inserted the ghastly white spine.
Amidst a cracking sound, this "Gardner Martin," seemingly from hell, twisted his neck and smiled sinisterly at Gardner Martin, who had already changed positions and condensed a large number of crimson Fire Ravens that were nearly white.
"Olson is long dead. I've been controlling his head and body.
"In the future, I'll replace you."
...
In the wilderness, the ground trembled violently, and blazing cracks slithered into the distance like fiery serpents.
The figures of Magician and Justice appeared.

Chapter 483: Hidden History

Dressed in a white shirt with a knot and a beige dress, Magician fixed her gaze upon the menacing hurricane that bridged the gap between sky and earth. Her eyes glittered, as if concealing the vast cosmos.

"Vermonda Sauron is indeed a Sequence 1 Conqueror. It's no wonder He could influence generations of the Sauron family after losing control and going underground. It's no wonder the Sauron family, once a royal lineage, swiftly declined," Magician mused, sighing.

Justice, inquisitive, asked, "I wonder how the former leader of the Secret Order, Zaratul, and Emperor Roselle played a role in Vermonda Sauron losing control and entering the Fourth Epoch Trier. The Sauron branch, wielding Grade 0 Sealed Artifacts, obstinately believes that they harmed Vermonda, causing the Conqueror to lose control. The former even left a prophecy to mislead generations of Sauron family members."

Magician chuckled and replied, "Based on the information Lumian gathered and my research into the seal, the issue deep within Red Swan Castle's underground maze doesn't seem like something Zaratul or Emperor Roselle could create. Only a Weather Warlock and a Conqueror can resonate abnormally with Fourth Epoch Trier day after day, creating dangerous changes in corresponding places. Zaratul and Emperor Roselle likely exploited the problems that Red Swan Castle and Vermonda Sauron already had."

While she spoke, the Tarot Club's Major Arcana card holder shifted her gaze away from the hurricane sweeping through the world and focused on Fourth Epoch Trier, veiled in a thin gray fog.

The starlight in her eyes remained, as if she sought something to pinpoint her next target. She didn't abruptly halt and engage in conversation at a crucial moment.

Justice nodded in agreement and remarked, "If it were me, I wouldn't venture further into Trier after becoming an Angel to minimize the abnormal influence the underground might have on me. Vermonda Sauron disregarded hidden dangers and stayed in Red Swan Castle for an extended period. He must have had a strong desire for something in Fourth Epoch Trier."

"Didn't the Sauron family construct the White Maple Palace outside Trier? Previously, Vermonda's royal family resided there and rarely returned to Trier." Magician brought up the fact that the Sauron family was aware of the issue before adding, "Zaratul likely played a significant role in Vermonda Sauron's situation. As you know, He is an Archangel of the Seer pathway. Without His 'assistance,' it

wouldn't have been easy for Vermonda Sauron—even as a Conqueror—to create a leak in the seal. He entered Fourth Epoch Trier after losing control. Back then, the seal's effects weren't as potent as they were a few years ago. There was no need for modifications."

Justice pondered for a moment and said, "What I'm more curious about is who designed the Hostel ritual. Their use of mysticism similarities and loopholes resembles that of high-level Seer, Apprentice, or Marauder Beyonders. Or perhaps they have had long interactions with these high-level Beyonders and were adept at learning."

"Perhaps the corresponding pathway of the Deceased excels in this as well. Perhaps it's secretly influenced by that Celestial Worthy, or perhaps that entity wants to use the temporary opening of the seal to do something. As you know, the Iron and Blood Cross Order used to believe in Him. It's too easy for Him to mislead us," Magician mused, uncertain of the right answer.

Starlight flickered in her eyes; she found it challenging to observe and determine the situation in the thin gray fog.

As Magician scrutinized Fourth Epoch Trier, she informed Justice, "The level of the catacombs' seal corresponds to this location.

"At its heart lies the Samaritan Women's Spring, where Blood Emperor Alista Tudor met His end. The razed imperial palace and its surroundings harbor diverse dangers. The lingering divine power is unimpressive and consumable. Sigh, every time I bring up something of this sort, it feels like I should adopt a more vulgar vocabulary. Only then can I truly capture my sentiments about the Blood Emperor's lunacy.

"Hence, you won't unearth anything significant from here. Only upon approaching will you discern that Mr. Fool's gray fog has grown denser, thicker, and more palpable.

"The catacombs' fourth and third levels correspond to Fourth Epoch Trier, excluding that specific area. Corruption and divine power still linger abundantly. Navigating certain areas demands adherence to specific rules; otherwise, even Angels may meet Their demise.

"The two levels above the catacombs correlate with the wilderness beyond the gray fog. Humans can traverse them to a certain extent, but with Vermonda Sauron lingering, the danger rivals that of the Fourth Epoch Trier..."

Just as Magician concluded her words, a frenzied and terrifying roar echoed from the area where the weather had dramatically shifted.

The formless flames that illuminated the surroundings and

shrouded the entire "sky" seemed to be influenced, coalescing into a massive vortex.
Within the vortex, shapeless and translucent flames descended from above, striking the wilderness like a colossal sword that pierced through heaven and earth.
Amidst this chaos, the ground quaked even more violently. Fiery crevices extended further towards Fourth Epoch Trier, concealed within the gray fog.
Magician remained unperturbed as she observed the splendid yet dilapidated city for a while.
Then, she said to Justice, "Let's enter."
Justice tersely acknowledged, offering no objections.
Both of them tacitly avoided mentioning Vermonda Sauron, an Archangel who had lost control—a Conqueror. They had no intention of joining the battle or seizing the Beyonder characteristic.
For them, the Tarot Club's primary goal in this matter was to prevent the evil gods' bestowed from approaching the innermost seal, ensuring they couldn't leak the danger within which would affect Trier aboveground and the entire world.
Furthermore, they sought the lost Minor Arcana card holders to guide them out.
As for the Conqueror Beyonder characteristic, symbolizing an Archangel and Sequence 1, as long as it didn't fall into the hands of heretics, obtaining it wasn't a particularly grave issue for anyone. Magician didn't mind observing and, if the opportunity arose, pilfering the gains. However, she wasn't a high-level Beyonder of the Marauder pathway capable of dividing herself and participating in every battlefield.
Despite achieving a similar effect by moving back and forth, she had to respect Mr. Fool's gray fog and the core seal of Fourth Epoch Trier. Corresponding restrictions were undoubtedly in place.
Starlight blossomed, and Magician and Justice vanished. The thin gray fog enshrouding Fourth Epoch Trier undulated.
...
As soon as Gardner Martin's head—nestled over Olson's headless corpse—finished speaking, a multitude of blazing white fireballs materialized around him, hurtling towards Gardner Martin, who had suffered a chest wound.
In the midst of the rumbling explosion, Gardner Martin's figure in the silver armor suddenly vanished.
After the shockwave subsided, he reappeared in a corner of the ruins.
Then, he witnessed the other "him" merge with the blazing white

flaming spear, which burrowed into the thin gray fog and disappeared into the randomly scattered buildings of Fourth Epoch Trier.
Gardner Martin's pupils constricted, and he was about to give chase when a violent and furious roar echoed from afar.
His entire body froze. Blood vessels beneath the visor on his face appeared, dark red as if flowing with flames.
Instinctively, Gardner Martin turned and prepared to sprint towards the distant apocalypse-like hurricane.
The space between his eyebrows twitched, and a faint red dot appeared.
Gardner Martin finally regained control of himself. He took a deep breath and returned to normal.
He gazed in the direction the other "him" had fled and muttered in a self-deprecating tone, "Were those harsh words and all-out attacks meant to make it easier for him to escape? As expected of me. Do you realize that failing to assassinate me means staying here means I'll inevitably kill you?"
As Gardner Martin muttered to himself, he produced a canister made of dark glass, its liquid a green hue reminiscent of grass.
He unscrewed the cap and downed half the canister. The wound on his chest began to heal at a visible rate.
It was a healing agent concocted by a Madame of the Nightstalkers, obtained by Gardner Martin through Philip.
Philip, who had united numerous evil god cults, had no shortage of similar items, but under the Hurricane of Light, the fragile canisters shattered.
After stowing away the remaining half canister of the agent, Gardner Martin, clad in silver-white full-body armor, ventured into the thin gray fog and Fourth Epoch Trier.
...
In the cover of a narrow street, behind a collapsed building, Franca hissed in agreement with Lumian's conjecture.
"That's right. This is a true relic from a divine war, and it's even more dangerous. It's entirely possible that the entire city is riddled with ailments."
She suspected that the closer she got to the place where Blood Emperor Alista Tudor had met his end, the more peculiar and horrifying the ailments became. Some seemed to have sprouted from the decaying corpses of deities. Ignoring Low-Sequence Beyonders whose bodies didn't fundamentally differ from ordinary humans, even Saints and Angels would likely succumb to the "disease" and perish.
Franca paused for a moment before suggesting to Jenna, "Why

don't you give the black figurine to Anthony for safekeeping? It might be dangerous for you to hold it, and he can use that item to create his own Mirror Substitution, effectively increasing his chances of survival."

Franca couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't a wise decision for a female Demoness like Jenna to possess a Primordial Demoness figurine, whether it was the genuine article or the mirrored version.

Without waiting for Jenna's response, Lumian spoke in a deep voice, "It's better if Jenna holds it. She has the lucky gold coin."

"That's true..." Just as Franca finished speaking, she suddenly heard a chime not far away.

It resembled the bell of a bicycle, yet it was clearer and rang out for a longer duration.

Chapter 484: Mockery

Franca wasn't surprised at all, even though she wondered why so many things were happening in this damn place.

This was Fourth Epoch Trier. Even if it wasn't a land of a fallen god, it wouldn't lack abnormalities!

Lumian and the others cautiously emerged from their concealment, peering from different vantage points toward the source of the chimes.

The location wasn't distant, yet the fog in that direction seemed unusually dense. The structures loomed faintly, as though just a fragment of history had materialized.

Within the fog's depths, a contraption reminiscent of a steam locomotive glided by without a fuss. It sported only two carriages, lacking a smokestack. Peculiar frames extended from the top, linking it to something suspended in midair.

Ding ding ding. The train ventured into a zone of even thicker fog, disappearing from view.

Although Franca and her companions couldn't discern the details clearly, an unexplained dread seized them, akin to standing on the precipice or treading on blades piercing their skin.

Before they could contemplate the ramifications of the fog's metamorphosis and the arrival of these peculiar objects, their surroundings plunged into a profound darkness. Dusk gave way, and night loomed.

A dense fog cloaked the area.

Lumian, sensing an unsettling disturbance, yearned to evade it, but the abnormal fog, tainted with a dark hue, obstructed any attempt to "teleport" to an unaffected area. Beyond the fog, the wilderness they came from eluded his senses.

The cold fog permeated their skin, prompting involuntary shivers from Franca and Jenna.

Almost simultaneously, the narrow street came alive with the flickering of candle flames and oil lamps. Laughter, cries, and voices erupted, transforming the once-silent surroundings.

Fourth Epoch Trier burst into vibrant life, resonating with clamor and the pulsations of existence.

Anthony, without conscious thought, surveyed the diverse houses and narrow streets, catching sight of an asymmetrical, pitch-black building. Candlesticks dangled from above, casting light upon the figure standing at the window.

The figure donned a black bonnet, with one side sunken and the other protruding. Dark clothes adorned him, with buttons haphazardly fastened, and a smooth wound diagonally sliced his

body from shoulder to waist.
Evidently caused by a sharp broadsword.
In that moment, the man's diagonally cleaved body resembled a child's stacked building blocks, not properly assembled.
He nonchalantly nibbled at a meat pie, chewed morsels falling from the wound to the ground, yet he remained oblivious.
Additional figures emerged in other habitable houses.
Some appeared like melted candles that had solidified once more, their flesh viscous and indistinct. Others had pale-white skin, and greasy white feathers sprouted from their pores, oozing yellowish pus. Some had tiny holes in their bodies, with black insects flying in and out. There were those reduced to white skeletons, with only a mismatched human-skinned mask covering their faces. Some had degenerated into black shadows, as if burned...
On the narrow street, a yellow, blue, and red sphere, about half the height of an adult human, rolled forward. An inverted clown, dressed in exaggerated clothes, stood atop it.
The clown's ears were unlike those of a human, dog-like and slightly pointed. Dark gray hair covered his red-yellow-painted face.
These are the long-dead citizens of Fourth Epoch Trier? Lumian's eyelids twitched.
He, Franca, and the others also observed the bloodstained faces and cold expressions of these figures.
"Very similar, very similar to those Mirror People..." Franca muttered to herself before exclaiming in horror, "Could the gray fog's transformation have transported us to the Fourth Epoch Trier in the mirror? The citizens of Fourth Epoch Trier in reality are dead, but the ones in the mirror are still alive?"
Before she could finish, Lumian and Anthony's gazes turned toward her and Jenna.
"Could it be that it's the problem with those two things again?" Franca's scalp tingled as she said, "Did they cause us to be devoured by the mirror's Fourth Epoch Trier after the gray fog transformed?"
"That's not it. I believe it's a universal abnormality. Apart from a few special individuals who enter this place, they all arrive in the mirror ruins after being enveloped by the expanding gray fog." Lumian observed the narrow street brimming with vitality, pondering for a moment. "The most likely possibility is that the two figurines triggered Fourth Epoch Trier, causing changes like the gray fog's expansion."
Jenna fell silent for a moment before frowning.
"But we've been here for a while. Why did something only happen now? We didn't do anything just now..."

"That's right!" Franca suddenly realized. "Those Hostel residents must have triggered something while wandering around after their entry!"
As soon as Franca finished speaking, a hoarse and terrified shout echoed nearby.
"Help!
"Save me!"
Lumian and his companions turned their attention toward the voice and witnessed a man in a black formal suit, his hair neatly combed like a prominent figure's secretary, sprinting down the narrow street.
His face was marred by abscesses, oozing mucus. Occasionally, he turned his head 180 degrees, his eyes filled with fear as if a formless and terrifying entity pursued him.
"Save me!"
Amidst his cries, the man's body suddenly froze, and he involuntarily retreated. His retreat accelerated until he lifted off.
"Ah!"
Amidst intense screams, he plunged into the dense gray fog and the shadowy buildings.
In the next moment, the voice abruptly ceased, and silence enveloped that area.
Lumian and the others' hearts pounded with a strong sense of danger.
Despite the man in the black suit not being an ordinary person, suspected to be the bestowed of an evil god from the Order of All Extinction or the Sick Church, and having been corrupted by this place to a certain extent, allowing him to turn his head 180o, Lumian, Anthony, and their companions still felt the terror lurking in the depths of the gray fog.
It was as if they could already envision themselves being "dragged" into the gray fog and vanishing.
However, at that moment, they had no idea what to do or how to hide. Dense black gray fog surrounded the suspected mirror ruins, and unknown dangers loomed in the shadows, quietly approaching.
At that moment, Termiboros's majestic voice resonated in Lumian's ears:
"Keep running until you reach that pillar. Don't stop on the way. Don't turn back. Don't teleport. Don't pull your companions."
Isn't... isn't that the direction where the monster was "devoured"? If we take the initiative to approach, wouldn't we be sending ourselves as food to its doorstep? Lumian grappled with uncertainty, unsure if Termiboros had sensed real danger and

planned to intervene or if He was exploiting the opportunity to advance His own agenda.
"You can choose not to believe it," Termiboros's deep voice added.
Despite his suspicions, Lumian's gaze remained fixed on the spot where the evil god bestowed's figure had been "devoured."
Deep within the gray fog, amidst looming, collapsed, and towering buildings, a hazy black pillar stretched into the sky.
Suddenly, Lumian recalled something.
At the entrance of the fourth level of the catacombs—Krismona Night Pillar.
As for Krismona, she was a high-ranking Demoness who had perished during the War of the Four Emperors in Fourth Epoch Trier!
She was even a child of God, a true child of the Primordial Demoness... This place is suspected to be the mirror's Fourth Epoch Trier... Lumian surveyed the surroundings and saw that the situation elsewhere was similar. He gritted his teeth and said, "Let's move forward! To the black pillar!"
The sense of danger intensified, pushing Lumian to make a decisive gamble.
Move forward? Franca, Jenna, and Anthony were brimming with questions about Lumian's choice.
Everyone had witnessed the chilling fate of the man in the formal suit!
Lumian stood tall and declared in a commanding voice, "Jenna, carry the spoils of war. Don't stop, don't turn around, and don't pull any of our companions!"
Upon finishing his sentence, he darted out of his hiding spot.
Given the specificity of Lumian's instructions, Franca cast a glance at him and chose to trust his judgment.
Jenna tightened her grip on the lucky gold coin, hoisted the cloak containing the spoils of war, and followed suit. Anthony, having exacted his revenge, harbored no regrets or obsessions. Lumian had proven his correctness multiple times, so he didn't question him and trailed closely.
Thud! Thud! Thud! The quartet sprinted down the narrow street, passing by the inverted clown, who rolled forward on the ball at a deliberate pace. They plunged into the depths of the gray fog, heading towards the black pillar.
...
In a corner of Fourth Epoch Trier, in front of a black iron-like house adorned with a red pattern, a wilderness overgrown with weeds had been condensed to the size of an ordinary square.
Within a dark-red open carriage in the wilderness, Lady Moon,

draped in a loose white robe and a light-colored veil, queried Madame Pualis, who stood beside her, "What's wrong?"
Madame Pualis, dressed in black with her head covered by her right hand, replied, "I can hear my child crying again..."
Lady Moon nodded gently and offered reassurance, "That's unavoidable. Rest here and catch up when you've recovered."
"Are you sure you can handle it alone?" Madame Pualis's facial muscles twitched and distorted intermittently.
Lady Moon smiled and responded, "My child left me a gift. Don't worry."
She didn't consider Madame Night to be of much help in this matter. Madame Night could enter because she needed to stay at the Sacred Heart Cloister to draw attention and couldn't remain in the Hostel.
"Alright," Madame Pualis said regretfully.
After Lady Moon's carriage and the wilderness departed, Madame Night's expression quickly returned to normal.
Lady Moon's carriage, pulled by two Demon-like creatures, advanced for a while before the gray fog thickened and expanded.
Her eyes narrowed as a blood-stained umbilical cord materialized in her hand.
The umbilical cord emitted a brilliant golden sunlight, warding off all corrosion and influence.
Thus, Lady Moon successfully reached the periphery of the land of a fallen god. The gray fog here stood as dense as a wall.
Attempting to approach, she found herself blocked, akin to an ordinary person encountering an impenetrable barrier.
Lady Moon felt a compelling force but couldn't proceed any further.
She whispered in surprise and confusion, "How could this be..."
As she pondered to herself, Lady Moon surveyed her surroundings.
Suddenly, her gaze froze.
On the surface of a nearby half-collapsed palace-like structure, a flamboyant red color seized the wall, outlined in a bloody state: "Didn't anyone tell you that there's another seal here?"

Chapter 485: Night Pillar

The intensifying gray fog at the core that spread to every corner of Fourth Epoch Trier didn't faze Gardner Martin, wrapped in sleek silver-white full-body armor. Instead of alarm, delight surged within him. Since the invasion of the power from Building 13 on Avenue du Marché, and being able to hear the great voice, such scenes had frequented his dreams. It felt like returning home, the door wide open for him.

Without hesitation, Gardner Martin sprinted toward the heart of Fourth Epoch Trier, heading for the land of the fallen god.

...

Through a street so narrow that the residents in the houses on both sides could almost reach out and shake hands, Lumian and his companions sprinted forward.

After only a dozen steps, Lumian sensed an intangible force emanating from the pitch-black gray fog. It was like the countless arms of a terrifying entity, gently and methodically caressing every living being to determine its prey.

Lumian's scalp tingled. Even with his clothes providing cover, goosebumps erupted where the formless entity touched him.

Instinctively, he wanted to resist, but then he remembered Termiboros's words.

"Don't stop. Don't turn back. Don't teleport. Don't pull your companions!"

While this didn't explicitly mention resisting, defending, or attacking, Lumian felt it wise to observe and wait for developments.

Suppressing the urge to incinerate the formless entities, he compelled himself to move forward.

Jenna, by his side, and Franca and Anthony behind him, closely monitored Lumian. If he didn't act, neither did they. If he did, they would quickly follow suit.

Observing Lumian refraining from confronting the formless entity in the dim gray fog, they braced themselves, enduring the intense and danger-filled caresses.

In the midst of this, Franca found the formless object somewhat familiar.

Recalling the suspicion that this place was the mirror's Fourth Epoch Trier, closely linked to the Demoness pathway, she quickly had an answer.

It bore a striking resemblance to a Demoness of Pleasure's spider silk!

Could it be left behind by a high-level Demoness? Franca imagined a

scene: a colossal pitch-black, half-human spider, nestled silently in the depths of the gray fog, extending spider silk that seemed to possess a life of its own, attempting to locate and capture its prey.
After covering more than ten steps in a sprint, Lumian was pleasantly surprised to notice the formless entity slowly retracting. It no longer actively caressed him, but given their dense presence, occasional brushes or touches were inevitable.
This change appeared to be a response to his proactive approach towards the source of the formless entities.
These formless entities seemed to single out those attempting to escape!
Upon breaking free from the narrow street and delving into the thick gray fog, Lumian suddenly felt his hair stand on end, a chilling sensation running down his spine.
His intuition warned of immense danger ahead, a threat capable of obliterating them all. The consequences of getting closer were beyond imagination.
Franca and the others involuntarily slowed down. The horror felt palpable, like a loaded revolver pressed against their foreheads, poised to fire at any moment.
Lumian clenched his teeth and pressed on.
Having chosen to trust Termiboros's advice, he needed to endure until there was evidence to the contrary. Otherwise, he might as well do something else from the beginning!
He didn't halt, and Jenna and the others didn't dare to either. They resembled fools aware of an impending cliff, understanding their insignificance, yet choosing to rush forward, like an idiot.
At that moment, Lumian caught sight from the corner of his eye of black flames erupting over Jenna's body. Pain etched her face, fear mirrored in her eyes.
Crack! Jenna shattered like a mirror, only to reappear, still engulfed in black flames and frost.
Her eyes pleaded with Lumian.
Instinctively, Lumian raised his left hand, as if to aid Jenna. However, a brief moment of hesitation swept over him, and he withdrew his hand, fixing his gaze ahead.
Don't pull companions!
Despair, surprise, and resentment filled Jenna's eyes instantly.
She coughed and came to a standstill.
Swiftly ensnared by the formless entities, she was dragged deeper into the gray fog.
Franca, witnessing this, had an immediate change in expression, ready to offer assistance when Lumian's instructions flashed through her mind.

She hesitated.
In that moment, Jenna's expression transformed into one of pure hatred, blood seeping from the pores on her face. A shrill scream escaped her lips, akin to a curse echoing towards everyone.
Seeing this, Lumian and the others experienced a strange sense of relief.
This Jenna seemed more like a Mirror Person!
Amidst the shrill scream, Jenna vanished into the depths of the gray fog, her voice abruptly silenced.
Almost simultaneously, Lumian caught Jenna in his peripheral vision, sprinting beside him with an anxious and nervous expression.
As expected! Lumian roughly comprehended why Termiboros had cautioned against pulling companions.
In this realm, a companion could seamlessly switch with their mirror counterpart at any moment. Assisting the "Mirror Person" risked harm to their true companion, leading to complete assimilation into this place, becoming "food" for the entity at the source of the formless objects.
Dammit! Couldn't you be more explicit? These reasons aren't particularly intricate. You insist on us experiencing them ourselves and overcoming them! Cursing Termiboros inwardly, Lumian pressed on with even more determination.
In the subsequent encounters, similar challenges arose multiple times. Yet, armed with experience, they refrained from resisting or attempting escape. They resisted the impulse to aid their companions.
Lumian and the others, focused on their path, ran straight using the black pillar as a guide. Occasionally, they bypassed obstacles.
Finally, the black pillar loomed not far ahead.
Simultaneously, Lumian, Anthony, and the rest were astonished to find that the imminent danger, on the verge of colliding with them, had mysteriously vanished.
No, it hadn't disappeared. It was now behind Lumian and the group—distant!
Running toward danger results in moving away from it? Just like the pale-black stone brick area in the wilderness, the direction here is twisted and chaotic? Amid Lumian's surprise, he didn't glance back, nor did he pause to celebrate. He persisted, sprinting toward the black pillar.
Had he not set a resolute example, Franca and Jenna might have turned around. Nonetheless, they pressed forward, a sense of relief mingling with lingering fear.
After covering dozens of meters, the quartet reached the square

where the black pillar stood.
The ground was paved with pale-black stone bricks, and numerous grayish-white stone pillars lay in ruins, only a few remnants remaining.
Compared to the black pillars, these "surviving" grayish-white stone pillars were as inconspicuous as ants.
The colossal black pillar surpassed even the Krismona Night Pillar Lumian had witnessed on the third level of the catacombs. It stretched into the sky, seeming to burn with formless flames, its destination shrouded in mystery.
The scene brought to Lumian's mind the pale-black stone bricks in the wilderness outside and the numerous grayish-white stone pillars in the vicinity, but nothing akin to the black pillar.
Had the Night Pillar in the wilderness collapsed and been destroyed? Did that event lead to the old bones crawling out, causing the corruption in Building 13 on Avenue du Marché? Was it then mended by constructing the catacombs and relocating countless corpses? Lumian ventured a guess based on these thoughts.
Franca and Jenna surveyed the square ahead, observing that the area surrounding the black pillar had sunk into the ground. Below, there seemed to be white magma flowing, and faint black tentacles lurked.
Though there were no explicit warnings of danger, Lumian and the others sensed that this might be even more dangerous than the entity they had previously encountered.
Next to the black pillar stood a 1.78-meter-tall snowman. Its frosty face, cracked to form eyes, nose, and mouth, lacked ears.
As Lumian's gaze nonchalantly swept across the snowman, it abruptly froze.
He noticed a dark stain on the snowman's right eye, as if it wore a monocle.
Amon? Lumian startled, a desire to flee taking hold.
At that moment, Termiboros's majestic voice echoed in his ears.
"It's dead."
Dead... Lumian breathed a sigh of relief.
It made sense. Amon, a nobleman of the Fourth Epoch's Tudor Empire, wouldn't be exempt from the casualties of the divine war. It was plausible that dozens, even hundreds of avatars perished back then. Retrieving them might not have been feasible in the circumstances.
For some reason, Lumian detected a trace of joy in Termiboros's concise words.
Observing the snowman, Anthony suddenly felt his forehead heat

up, and his breath turned hot. His Spirit Body rapidly weakened.
"I'm infected," he calmly informed his companions.
Ailment... Lumian glanced at the black pillar again.
Could this be the true form of the Krismona Night Pillar?
Even the figurine of the Primordial Demoness can't stem the corruption of ailments in this place?
Franca's heart skipped a beat as she instructed Jenna, "Take out that figurine."
Simultaneously, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the Primordial Demoness figurine crafted from bone.
After Jenna handed her the black one, Franca motioned for Anthony to come closer and observed his expression.
"How do you feel now?"
"It seems better. I'm... I'm getting better." Anthony scrutinized his physical condition earnestly.
Franca smiled.
"I knew it. How could Jenna and I be fine, but you're sick?
"Looks like we have to maintain a certain distance from the figurines."
As soon as she finished speaking, blazing white Fire Ravens soared out from behind the black pillar, hurtling toward them.
Then, a figure emerged. It was Gardner Martin, attired in a black formal suit and yellow vest, an unusual sight.
His gaze fixed on the black figurine in Jenna's hand and the bone statue in Franca's, revealing a longing expression.

Chapter 486: The Mirror People's Conspiracy

As the blazing-white Fire Ravens erupted from behind the black pillar, Lumian's reflexes kicked in.

While Franca, engrossed in deciphering the cause of Anthony's ailment, Lumian seemingly engaged in the discussion. Yet, beneath the facade, he—a Hunter—maintained a vigilant stance, keenly aware of his surroundings.

In this dangerous and ominous setting, he couldn't afford to focus solely on conversation.

Lumian thrust his palms towards the oncoming blazing-white Fire Ravens. In a swift motion, a colossal crimson fireball materialized, hastily intercepting the impending assault.

However, before it could reach its target, the unstable structure caused it to detonate.

Amidst the explosive chaos, a shockwave, laced with flames, surged forward and sideways, engulfing nearly all the blazing-white Fire Ravens like a torrent.

Confronting the fiery wave head-on, the Fire Ravens staggered, losing stability in the storm. They prematurely blossomed, transforming into a dazzling display of fireworks.

The Fire Ravens circling from the side were also affected by the explosive waves, deviating from their intended trajectories or being partially extinguished.

Hunters, particularly those at higher Sequences like Pyromaniac and Conspirer, proved unparalleled in defending against the swarm attacks of Fire Ravens.

Thanks to this interference, Franca and Jenna, both Assassins, along with the Psychiatrist, Anthony Reid, effortlessly dodged the tracking-capable, blazing-white Fire Ravens. They observed as these dangerous projectiles landed on the ground, setting off fiery eruptions.

In the blink of an eye, Franca vanished, and Jenna swiftly moved toward the nearest grayish-white stone pillar. She scattered fluorescent powder and chanted the Invisibility incantation in Hermes.

Anthony, seemingly back in the fray, rolled and sprinted, encircling another relatively intact grayish-white stone pillar in an attempt to find cover.

Lumian maintained his position, hands poised to push forward. His golden-black hair swirled in the ordinary "gust of wind" that followed the massive fireball's explosion.

Looking at Gardner Martin, unusually tall and face marked with bloodstains, Lumian taunted, "Is this your way of greeting?

Sending a swarm of Fire Ravens to welcome us? Hey, what's with the change in appearance and the missing armor? Are you the mirror's Gardner Martin?"
Gardner Martin, donned in a black formal suit and yellow vest, ceased his attack. Instead, he paused and sneered, "Sooner or later, I'll become the real Gardner Martin."
Observing the situation, Lumian didn't rush to "teleport" behind Gardner Martin. He chuckled and remarked, "So, you're admitting to being a counterfeit?"
His aim was to provoke and incite the other party, unraveling the motives of these Mirror People.
Surely, their purpose wasn't merely to replace genuine forms and return to the real world for a serene life.
It had to be one of the objectives, but not the sole or primary one. The actions of a Mirror Person were too intricate for such a straightforward motive.
Mirror Gardner Martin scanned Lumian's surroundings, as if seeking the invisible Franca and Jenna.
In response to Lumian's mockery, he sneered and stated, "Counterfeit? We, the counterfeits, might be the only ones to secure victory and survive.
"Look at the Fourth Epoch Trier, destroyed and reduced to ruins. Yet, it persists within the mirror. All its citizens remain alive."
You call that living? Lumian Lumian refrained from interrupting the Mirror Gardner's resentful narrative.
The formidable Beyonder with a peculiar form chuckled.
"Counterfeit? Countless members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order you usually encounter are already on our side. They've emerged from the mirror, spawned since the unexpected seal incident decades ago and the ensuing power leak. We've been covertly engaging in similar activities.
"Otherwise, how would Gardner Martin, Tony Twain, and Diest have known about Vermonda Sauron's underground entrance into the seal? How would they have recognized it as a Sequence 1 Conqueror Beyonder characteristic? How could they have been so focused on exploring the underground and inadvertently influenced?"
"..." Lumian was taken aback.
So, this involves the plans of your Mirror People?
Damn it, how many factions are entangled in this, and how many conspiracies are woven together?
While Gardner's words in the mirror shed light on the murky situation, making many details more plausible, Lumian still found it absurd.

Aren't there too many factions and conspiracies? And behind these conspiracies, even more conspiracies, as intricate as spiderwebs!
Mirror Gardner's expression returned to normal as he smiled and said,
"Ever wonder how the Iron and Blood Cross Order discovered the black figurine? How did they realize they could exploit the uniqueness of this mirror world to bypass the seal?
"Do you dare to keep carrying that figurine? It holds no practical value for you. Why not hand it over to me, and I'll let you leave this mirror world?
"Don't worry; you're not Gardner Martin. I can't replace you. I harbor no insurmountable malice towards you."
So, were the Fire Ravens from earlier merely a greeting? Lumian laughed and inquired, "Essentially, that figurine holds great value for you? What do you people intend to do with it?"
Lumian suspected that the Iron and Blood Cross Order's discovery or acquisition of the black Primordial Demoness figurine was orchestrated by these Mirror People. Their plan was undoubtedly intricate.
Mirror Gardner's lips curled as he replied, "Did you think I'd tell you?"
"Whom do you people serve?" Lumian interjected.
As the Mirror Gardner's mouth opened, his expression suddenly darkened, and his eyes brimmed with hatred.
"That's all the answers!"
Observing the Mirror Gardner's sudden shift, Lumian had a profound realization that these Mirror People could maintain normalcy most of the time and seamlessly replace the originals. However, when certain matters arose, they couldn't suppress their monstrous side.
Mirror Gardner seemed poised to convince Lumian and the others to surrender the black Primordial Demoness figurine when a figure materialized behind him.
Franca, lacking an Assassin suit, revealed a Hidden Blade from her left wrist. Enveloped in black flames, she thrust it into Mirror Gardner's back, causing the blood-stained figure to shatter like a mirror.
He reappeared on the other side of the black pillar, on the fringe of the collapsed area, wearing a sinister smile. He declared, "You're stalling for time and completing preparations. Me too!"
As he finished speaking, a man emerged from the debris of a crumbled grayish-white stone pillar outside the collapsed area, dripping with magma.
His face bore bloodstains too, and his short flaxen-colored hair,

along with slightly thick brown eyebrows, framed aqua-blue eyes and thin lips. Despite his unremarkable appearance, he uncannily resembled Franca.
Witnessing this figure, a phrase flashed through Franca's mind: "It's over..."
It was her past self, her former identity as a man!
Ever since Franca began suspecting that this area represented the mirror's Fourth Epoch Trier, she harbored concerns that her past self would surface, exposing his true identity to Jenna. Now, her fears materialized.
It's over. Social death... Franca's mind raced as a woman emerged from behind another intact grayish-white stone pillar.
Adorned in a white shirt, a black vest, and dark pants, her pure black hair cascading over her shoulders, she exuded an imposing beauty. Despite her deep and delicate facial features, her blue eyes betrayed a sense of mockery.
Uh, t-this is eerily similar to Ciel... The mirror version of him is a woman? Franca swiftly scanned her surroundings, concealing herself again.
Behind different grayish-white stone pillars, two more figures emerged. One donned mercenary attire, with handsomely styled flaxen-colored hair, reminiscent of Jenna. The other wore military-green tops and bottoms, exuding a mature charm with a slightly plump figure. Beautiful with eyes as deep as an ancient forest pond.
Dammit! A male version of Jenna and a female version of Anthony! Anthony looks even more handsome and charming! This is different from the mirror world outside! Franca felt puzzled yet relieved.
This could provide a plausible explanation for "his" former appearance to resurface!
Lumian, equally perplexed by his mirror counterpart having a different gender, and the others weren't experiencing the same thing as Franca. Even if the mirror reflected their past selves, it shouldn't manifest like this.
If this was a fusion of a Demoness's mirror world, the stacking of feminization, and one's past, Jenna should be a woman, no matter what!
As Lumian's thoughts raced, he considered the Hunter pathway's ability to transform women into men, which was adjacent to the Demoness pathway.
Could it be that this mirror world is influenced by the Blood Emperor's corpse or residual divine power? Is it akin to Mr. Fool and the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings—a

power controlling these two pathways leaked, forming a unique mirror world that causes an overall reversal? Lumian didn't delve too deeply into it, as Mirror Gardner and his four helpers attacked.
The "Mirror Person" in a black formal suit and yellow vest didn't conceal his hatred, excitement, and desire.
...
In the wilderness, the entire ground seemed to sink two to three meters.
Diest's massive iron soldiers and yellowish-skinned giant entourage stood at the edge of the hurricane. Occasionally, one of them would self-destruct, reducing to fragments.
Despite the wary standoff between the president of the Iron and Blood Cross Order and Snarner Einhorn, They directed Their attention to the mildly intelligent monster that appeared to have lost control and was more challenging to deal with.
In the intense battle, They managed to restrain or knock Vermonda Sauron to the ground two or three times, but They themselves were also affected, in a dire state that hindered Them from seizing the opportunity.
In the current moment, They found themselves temporarily disabled.
Suddenly, a surge of knowledge materialized into a beautiful woman wearing a brown captain's coat, with long chestnut hair and eyes resembling the blue sea.
Snarner, Diest, and the others' hearts tightened, fearing that the newcomer would take the initiative and ultimately claim the Conqueror Beyonder characteristic.
They all recognized the woman:
The eldest daughter of the deceased Emperor Roselle, Bernadette Gustav!
She, too, was an Angel!
Holding a pale-golden lamp, Bernadette observed the Angels' battle without direct involvement. Transforming into a torrent of knowledge once again, she surged towards the gray fog-shrouded Fourth Epoch Trier.
It was as if She had casually glanced at them while passing by.
"..." Snarner and Diest were initially taken aback by Her actions, but They swiftly regained Their composure and resumed their battle.

Chapter 487: Self-Confrontation

In Fourth Epoch Trier, shrouded in a dense gray fog, Voisin Sanson, with thick blond locks, a well-kept beard, and deep-set features, yielded to the whims of destiny. He threaded through the chaotic streets, drawing nearer to the faintly discernible grand palace.

Abruptly, the stone slab beneath his feet shattered, and with swift precision, a skeletal hand shot up, seizing his ankle.

At the same instant, a knight adorned in jet-black armor charged on horseback. Wielding a broadsword ablaze in ghostly white flames, he slashed diagonally at Voisin Sanson.

Voisin Sanson's form swiftly morphed into an ethereal state, resilient against the onslaught of the pitch-black knight. However, with the passage of time, it gradually faded until it dissipated entirely.

His true self materialized almost 20 meters distant, fixating on the adversary.

Beneath the black visor of the knight, two dark-red flames flickered like candlelight. A grotesque wound, with pale-white intestines protruding, adorned its chest and abdomen. Perched on a desiccated white horse resembling a skeletal corpse,

the knight presided over a vast square wilderness. Within this expanse, myriad figures roamed. Some draped in white linen, their faces pallid and vacant. Others reduced to mere skeletons, while some concealed their visages behind masks of white paper.

On the fringes of the wilderness, a dark-red cradle-shaped carriage advanced, drawn by two abyssal, Demon-like creatures boasting goat horns.

Seated within the carriage was the regal Madame Pualis. Adorned with a flower crown and a green dress, her long brown hair was elegantly tied high. Bright brown eyes gazed forth as she held a small bowl crafted from green jade in one hand and an oak branch entwined with mistletoe in the other.

"What do you want?" Voisin Sanson inquired with a calm, resonant voice.

Madame Pualis responded, her smile unwavering, "Revenge, naturally."

Her eyes, once warm, gradually turned cold, but the grin on her face endured.

"Revenge..." Voisin Sanson echoed the word, a note of confusion in his voice. After a brief pause, he furrowed his brow and questioned, "For Aurore?"

In that moment, the undead and several Death Knights scattered across the wilderness withheld their attacks on Voisin Sanson, as

if anticipating the emotional release sought by the Madame they served.
Seated within the carriage, Madame Pualis offered a self-deprecating smile.
"For a Villain, one-sided love is destined to be fleeting. Passion inevitably wanes quickly. Yet, she met her end during that brief period, becoming a thorn lodged deep in my heart, unextractable. The mere thought of it is painful, fueling my anger and resentment.
"And all of this was caused by you!
"I desired to strike when we crossed paths earlier, but the circumstances weren't conducive. Lady Moon had yet to make her entrance, and I couldn't afford to delay the Great Mother's affairs for a personal vendetta. But now, in this quiet moment..."
Voisin Sanson narrowed his eyes. "After receiving the Great Mother's boon, shouldn't these delicate and easily shattered emotions be eradicated? Aren't you worried about undermining the grand objectives of the great entities?"
Madame Pualis chuckled and replied, "There are more fitting and potent individuals for that task. Like Lady Moon. As for me..."
Her expression softened, revealing a trace of wistfulness.
"In the past, I put my faith in the Great Mother to attain strength and break free from the constraints of the antiquated Churches. I didn't have to concern myself with moral judgments or public opinion. No need to fear being attacked by some past victim at any moment, free to do as I pleased. Now, what I desire is vengeance!"
As Madame Pualis concluded her words, a pair of ethereal wings unfolded behind her, adorned with brown feathers of human size.
"Ah!"
A sharply discordant and anguished scream escaped her lips.
The remaining glass in the nearby structures shattered. Voisin Sanson's mind reverberated, as if he could sense his Spirit Body wailing.
...
In the rundown square, suspected to be the whereabouts of Krismona Night Pillar, Lumian zeroed in on his feminine "mirror self."
Only he comprehended the extent of the trouble he posed!
He might not be the most formidable presence among the gathering, but his unique skills and array of items could swiftly tip the scales in his favor. It was imperative to neutralize him in advance!
As for the mirror version of Gardner Martin, it was suspected that he possessed Mirror Substitution—proving challenging to dispatch

swiftly. Lumian's strategy was to eliminate the auxiliary threats first before zeroing in on him.
When the moment arrived, the combined effects of Psychiatrist's Frenzy, Flog's strikes, and the arousal triggered by Beatrice's Necklace would exploit the psychological vulnerabilities of the Mirror People. Their abundance of negative emotions and the potent desire to achieve and supplant made them susceptible.
A dark mark on Lumian's shoulder illuminated, and his form abruptly vanished, reappearing behind the heroic-looking female Lumian, similarly attired but with black hair.
Almost simultaneously, the blue eyes of the female Lumian gleamed with a mocking glint.
Then, she vanished.
Her figure materialized behind Anthony Reid, mostly concealed by the grayish-white stone pillar.
Spirit World Traversal!
She knew the technique as well!
Dammit! Lumian cursed inwardly. The dark mark on his right shoulder emitted another shadowy glow.
He had to hurry to his aid.
While he had considered the possibility of his mirror self possessing teleportation abilities, he had anticipated that the other party would target him, prioritizing his elimination—the most significant threat. At worst, they might exchange positions. However, he hadn't expected the female Lumian to focus on Anthony Reid.
In that critical moment, Lumian pieced together the rationale.
Primarily, the Mirror Person harbored an intense resentment toward the original counterpart, driven by a desire to supplant them. Given their profound psychological issues, these could be effectively countered by Psychiatrist's Frenzy and similar abilities.
Secondly, Anthony Reid lacked proficiency in evasion and lacked diverse substitutes. His defense wasn't substantially superior to that of an ordinary person, rendering him susceptible to swift elimination, thereby reducing their team's strength.
As Lumian engaged in discourse with the Mirror Gardner Martin, Anthony Reid remained concealed behind a nearby grayish-white stone pillar. He observed his surroundings and assessed the enemy's mental state, strategizing his actions for the impending battle.
He had noticed the appearance of his feminine version, as well as the Mirror Gardner, male Jenna, and male Franca to either hide in the shadows or vanish. The complexity of the situation intensified, and he instinctively sensed the impending challenge posed by

these formidable adversaries.
As the figure of the female Lumian vanished, Anthony Reid, familiar with Lumian's Spirit World Traversal, quickly discerned the monster's intentions and thought process.
She was employing "teleportation," with him as her target. Her primary focus was dealing with the Psychiatrist!
As these realizations raced through his mind, Anthony didn't attempt to evade to either side.
Given the proximity and his limited physical abilities, escaping the danger zone before female Lumian unleashed her subsequent onslaught was an impossibility.
Instead, he opted for an offensive approach, intending to disrupt any forthcoming storm of attacks with his own strikes!
Anthony forcibly twisted his body, his eyes widening in silent determination, a faint golden hue tinting his gaze.
Then, he confronted the captivating and seemingly welcoming figure of female Lumian.
The other party harrumphed.
Spell of Harrumph!
Two beams of white light shot out from female Lumian's nostrils, striking Anthony.
As the white beams reflected in Anthony's eyes, he made no attempt to dodge or evade. Instead, he invoked Frenzy.
With a thud, he crumpled to the ground, unconscious.
Female Lumian's facial muscles contorted, and dark-red blood vessels emerged beneath her skin, resembling tiny fire serpents coming to life.
Her blue eyes radiated violence and madness, while crimson flames bordering on white emanated from her body.
Lumian materialized beside her and the unconscious Anthony. Choosing not to employ the Spell of Harrumph, he clenched his right hand, enveloped in almost blazing-white flames, and delivered a punch to his "mirror self's" head.
With a cracking sound, female Lumian's body shattered like a mirror.
She, too, possessed Mirror Substitution!
Upon witnessing this, Lumian cursed inwardly once more.
Dogsh*t!
Despite anticipating that these Mirror People were closely related to mirrors and might have multiple Mirror Substitutions, thus opting for a flaming punch instead of the Spell of Harrumph to conserve spirituality, the confirmation left him frustrated and angered.
Only by facing it personally did he realize how repulsive abilities

like Mirror Substitution and Paper Figurine Substitutes were!
Now, there were a total of five enemies with Mirror Substitution. Four of them had even replicated their team's abilities. *How could they possibly prevail in such a situation?*
In that moment, the flames dissipated from Lumian's fiery fist, precisely as expected, landing on Anthony Reid.
The scalding pain abruptly snapped the Psychiatrist out of his stupor. Reacting instinctively, he rolled to smother the flames.
Suddenly, Mirror Gardner Martin's cold, smiling voice echoed from an unseen location.
"How does it feel? Are my aides proving stronger than you expected?
"Unfortunately, they hail from profound mirror images, and their genders have been reversed. They can't replace you and return to the real world.
"What do you say? Surrender the figurine in exchange for my friendship and an opportunity to depart this place? It's of no use to you."
If you're so powerful, why don't you just kill us and take the figurine? Are you wary of something? For example, Termiboros's escape? Or are you deliberately using such words to weaken our resistance and ensure your own safety to the greatest extent? Or are you actually not strong and are stalling for time for some development? A series of guesses raced through Lumian's mind.
Meanwhile, Anthony Reid, having extinguished the flames, rose to his feet and coughed.
Lumian's throat itched as he heard that.
Soon, Franca and Jenna emerged from invisibility amid uncontrollable coughing, having intended to encircle the female Anthony.
The voice of the Mirror Gardner resonated, accompanied by evident laughter.
"I neglected to mention that the Fire Raven I initially employed carries an Affliction disease. Igniting and detonating them only aids the spread of the disease.
"Those two figurines can only suppress non-conscious diseases, but this—this is under my control!"

Chapter 488: Mutual Provocation

Fire Raven fused with an Affliction disease? *Is that even possible?* Will I pull off something similar when I switch to the Hunter pathway? Is this the merging of different abilities through pathway switching? It's more unique and bizarre? As Franca coughed, surprise, solemnity, and a touch of anticipation painted her expression.

Even though she was compelled to break her invisibility, Franca found herself in close quarters with the female Anthony. Her left hand rose, directing the Ring of Punishment, snug around her thumb, at the Mirror Person.

Yet, Franca refrained from employing Psychic Piercing. It was a calculated move to confound the target and any hidden foes.

Having observed Lumian's skirmish, Franca suspected that female Anthony also possessed Mirror Substitution. Psychic Piercing wouldn't yield the desired effect.

In that case, why not afflict the opponent with a negative state that wouldn't trigger Mirror Substitution?

Beatrice's Necklace, dangling from Franca's chest, reflected the engulfing flames, stirring female Anthony's ambitions to life.

Franca had long discerned that these Mirror People harbored resentment and animosity toward their authentic selves. Their burning desire to prove themselves was their weakness.

The longing for success served as their greatest vulnerability.

As two coughs reached female Anthony's ears, she, being a Psychiatrist, mirrored the choice made by her male counterpart.

Unable to evade the ensuing assaults, she swiveled halfway around, locking eyes with Franca and Jenna, who had already materialized.

Her pupils turned vertical and shifted to a pale-golden hue.

Awe!

Unlike her male counterpart, female Anthony opted for Awe, considering the presence of two assailants. This ability had the potential to influence both targets.

The aura of a dragon—the pinnacle of the food chain—swiftly descended. Franca and Jenna couldn't help but tremble in fear.

One of them found themselves immobilized, while the other sought refuge behind the nearest grayish-white stone pillar.

Before female Anthony could unleash Awe, Jenna, still coughing, seized the moment. She flung a half-blood-stained cloak, causing the bone flute and wooden box to tumble toward the target's feet.

With her other hand, Jenna pulled the trigger of her revolver, propelling a yellow bullet engulfed in black flames towards female

Anthony.
However, in that critical moment, Awe took effect. Jenna's right hand quivered, causing the bullet to veer off course.
Amidst the gunfire, the shadowed Mirror Gardner narrowly evaded the bullet's trajectory.
Swiftly moving, he leaped to the ground, dodging the projectile, and rolled into another shadow, vanishing from sight.
Unharmed, female Anthony's eyes seemed to blaze with flames. She abandoned the idea of casting Frenzy on Franca, who succumbed to the effects of Awe, redirecting her focus to the coughing and moving male version of herself.
Thud! Thud! Thud! She charged forward, determined to prove herself by defeating the male Anthony.
At that moment, figures materialized behind the frozen Franca and the fleeing Jenna. They were male Franca and male Jenna, who had previously concealed themselves with their abilities.
The former aimed his hidden blade at Franca's back and struck with all his might. The latter fixed a glare at Jenna's back and pulled the trigger.
With two cracking sounds, Franca and Jenna's bodies shattered like mirrors, allowing them to escape the effects of Awe. However, their throats remained irritated. They had no choice but to endure the discomfort and occasionally cough as they faced off against male Franca and Jenna.
Lumian's throat itched, and his head, accustomed to enduring high temperatures, still radiated warmth.
As an Ascetic, this level of illness couldn't challenge his endurance.
He glanced at female Lumian, not far away, and crimson flames enveloped him, transforming into a fireball that shot forward.
Female Lumian, her face still marked by blood vessels, sneered and vanished from her spot once more.
Spirit World Traversal again!
Her figure reappeared behind the rapidly moving Anthony, as if she wouldn't stop until she had vanquished the Psychiatrist.
Just then, the fireball that had just shot out dissipated prematurely, morphing into a stream of light.
In the stream of light, Lumian's figure flashed as he "teleported" to Anthony's side.
He had been feigning an attack, anticipating female Lumian's use of Spirit World Traversal. He seized the opportunity to closely follow and block her!
To achieve this, Lumian not only destabilized the fireball's structure in advance but also utilized Lie's ability to strengthen his control over flames.

Appearing beside Anthony as swiftly as female Lumian, he promptly raised his iron-black boxing gloves and unleashed a flurry of chain punches!
Simultaneously, Lumian conjured the desire he longed to witness in his mind.
The desire to replace a real person!
This desire proved easier to trigger, and its detonation even better!
Having already adorned the Flog boxing gloves, Lumian aspired to exploit this state, potentially immune to Mirror Substitution, to impact the target and temporarily incapacitate his "mirror self" in combat.
With a resounding bang, Lumian's left and right punches met the resistance of female Lumian's raised hand. However, she lacked boxing gloves, and her forearm bore several bleeding punctures from Flog's short thorns.
Her eyes brimmed with escalating resentment and malice, as though she yearned for Lumian's demise in the very next second.
She had entirely forsaken her pursuit of Anthony Reid.
Bam! Bam! Bam! Lumian unleashed a barrage of punches, incessantly thwarting his mirror self's attempts to employ other abilities.
He persisted in taunting his counterpart.
"Hey, no Flog boxing gloves? Are you so feeble that you can't even mirror a mystical item below the demigod level?"
On the one hand, Lumian sought an emotional release. On the other, he aimed to use Provocation to incense his female self, heightening the likelihood of the Flog boxing gloves triggering the other's desires and emotions.
Female Lumian didn't hide her anger. Blocking Lumian's punches, she taunted with Provocation, "Imbecile! If you had detected Aurore's anomaly earlier, the issue might have been resolved.
"Imbecile! If it were me, I would've undoubtedly handled it better than you!"
Lumian's mind buzzed. Even as an Ascetic, he found himself affected by Provocation.
This frustration and guilt had long been buried deep in his heart, one of the root causes of all his pain.
His eyes turned bloodshot, a blend of embarrassment, anger, and a compelling urge to self-destruct surged from the depths of his being.
His attacks intensified as he sought to infuse the thought into his right hand. He wanted to witness the outcome if he unleashed the Blood Emperor's aura here in the mirror's Fourth Epoch Trier.
When the time came, everyone present—Voisin Sanson and the

other gods bestowed from different regions—would meet their demise together!
Just then, Lumian's thoughts abruptly cleared. His emotions and impulses felt as though caressed by a gentle breeze. The melodious melody his sister Aurore used to hum seemed to echo in his ears, swiftly calming him.
"Placate!"
Psychiatrist Anthony Reid's Placate.
Seizing the opportunity while Lumian relentlessly pounded female Lumian with punches, Anthony distanced himself. As he eluded the pursuit of his female self, he circled back to Lumian's vicinity. Sensing his companion's volatile mood, he promptly cast Placate.
Affected by Beatrice's Necklace, female Anthony only had eyes for her true self, indifferent to the fate of female Lumian.
Suppressing the urge to self-destruct, Lumian witnessed female Lumian teetering on the verge of collapse under his relentless onslaught, her expression contorted. Franca and Jenna's coughing intensified, hindering the use of their abilities. Their male counterparts seized the moment, forcing them to employ Mirror Substitution once again.
Franca was still okay, but Jenna likely had only one Mirror Substitution remaining.
Observing this, Lumian, his forehead ablaze, felt a mix of concern, nervousness, and confusion.
Where was Mirror Gardner?
In such a chaotic scenario, any attack—whether directed at Franca, Jenna, himself, or Anthony—would prove highly effective. He might even succeed in eliminating them one by one. After all, he was a Reaper.
Yet, Mirror Gardner refrained from attacking. Only the echoing, mocking laughter signaled his continued presence. He persisted in persuading Lumian and the others to surrender the black figurine and cease resisting.
"Hmph!"
Seizing the opportunity when Lumian's assault momentarily slowed, female Lumian, pushed to her limits, invoked the Spell of Harrumph.
Two beams of white light struck Lumian's body. His vision darkened, and he experienced the same sensation as his previous adversaries.
Crack!
A mirror shattered on Franca's body, and Lumian materialized beside her.
As Lumian's thoughts returned, a flurry of ideas raced through his

mind.
After spreading the disease with the sick ravens, Mirror Gardner refrained from employing any other offensive abilities. Instead, he chose to hide in the shadows or conceal himself...
Wait, it didn't begin with the disease spread by the sick ravens. It began with the emergence of male Franca and the other Mirror People...
Why didn't he attack?
Considering my mirror self's lack of the Flog boxing gloves, she probably doesn't possess the Blood Emperor's aura, Mr. Fool's seal, or Termiboros... The Flog boxing gloves were crafted from the branch of the Tree of Shadow...
The mirror world, despite its apparent danger and terror, shouldn't be incapable of mirroring the Flog boxing gloves...
Suddenly, Lumian had an epiphany.
These four Mirror People weren't naturally formed in the mirror's Fourth Epoch Trier. Mirror Gardner Martin had utilized his unique connection to this place to create them!
It was akin to an ability!
Mirror Gardner's decision not to attack stemmed from his concerted effort to sustain the four Mirror People. He couldn't engage in direct assault; his only recourse was to conceal himself and use words to interfere with the enemy, disrupting their combat will!
As these realizations coursed through his mind, Lumian couldn't help but smile.
Dodging male Franca's attack and anticipating the teleportation of female Lumian, he retrieved the Eye of Truth obtained from Bouvard. Lumian then adorned the peculiar monocle, seemingly fashioned from flesh and blood.
It had the ability to pierce through illusions, perceive reality, and discern the light of spirituality!

Chapter 489: Greed

Despite the severe corruption of the Eye of Truth, its ability to hear the voices of a hidden entity at any moment, and the risk of encountering uncontrollable negative effects, Lumian trusted that Fourth Epoch Trier, with its potent seal isolating external influences, provided a safeguard. Even the boons of evil gods couldn't trace back to their source, making it unlikely for him to hear the Hidden Sage's ravings.

In this realm, there should be no adverse effects when using the Eye of Truth, especially within the mirror's Fourth Epoch Trier.

However, Lumian acknowledged the potential presence of a fallen Angel from the Mystery Pryer pathway or remnants of corresponding divine power. Even with the Eye of Truth, there was a chance of hearing voices he shouldn't. Consequently, Lumian didn't plan to use it extensively. He intended to locate Mirror Gardner Martin and remove the mystical item when the opportunity presented itself.

Through the lens affixed to his eye, Lumian discerned nearly invisible spider silk swaying around Franca, subtly influencing male Jenna and the other Mirror People.

Similarly, male Franca had created a plethora of spider silks, utterly unaffected by the constraints of the term "Witch."

Lumian also took note of the fine snake-like black hair covering the area. They manifested and disappeared, delicately caressing every living being they touched. Their origin seemed to be the black pillar extending into the sky.

Concurrently, Lumian's left eye reflected Mirror Gardner Martin.

Concealed beside a grayish-white stone pillar, he seemed invisible.

Without hesitation, Lumian activated the black mark on his right shoulder, the fifth time since becoming an Ascetic.

With the Eye of Truth in place, he instantaneously vanished, reappearing behind Mirror Gardner.

The corners of Lumian's mouth curled up as he swung his right fist at his exposed foe, who had just realized his concealment had been shattered and had no time to react.

His hands were encased in iron-black boxing gloves adorned with multiple short thorns.

Flog!

In the midst of Mirror Gardner's attempt to lunge forward and transform into a burning-white spear, flying to the opposite side to distance himself, Lumian landed a punch behind his ear.

In a haste, Mirror Gardner could only duck, abruptly contorting as if he were boneless, attempting to somersault away.

Bang!
Lumian's right fist connected with Mirror Gardner's right shoulder. The impact distorted the other's shoulder, causing his body to stagger, nearly losing balance.
Mirror Gardner's combat prowess proved formidable. Despite tumbling to the ground, he seized the opportunity to pivot.
He was unfazed by the potential of the white beams or being shot in the head; he still possessed Mirror Substitution!
Confronting Lumian, who lunged at him with blood still dripping from his iron-black boxing gloves, Mirror Gardner smiled, his eyes reflecting blatant greed.
This time, Lumian opted to trigger Greed!
In an instant, Mirror Gardner ignited with blazing-white flames, morphing into a spear charging at Lumian.
At this range, he doubted that Lumian could evade the impending attack.
Having committed to close combat, he had to bear the consequences—rendered unable to fully utilize Spirit World Traversal!
Lumian didn't attempt to dodge, nor did he plan to. He swiftly adjusted his posture, watching as the blazing-white spear collided with his right chest.
His defense against flames was robust. The blazing-white spear took nearly two seconds to burn through his skin and flesh.
Yet, Lumian maintained a smile on his face. The pain only contorted his countenance, a testament to the resilience of an Ascetic.
Anthony Reid's Placate had indeed restored Lumian's composure, but the psychological issues brought to light lingered for the time being.
With two resounding bangs, Lumian seized the opportunity to deliver a left and right punch to the burning-white spear.
He exploited every chance to kindle Mirror Gardner's desires and emotions.
Ultimately, the blazing-white spear pierced Lumian's right chest, propelling him more than ten meters through the air.
Lumian's smile retained a touch of frenzy. Adorned with a silver earring, he withdrew his right palm, pressed against the grievous wound on his chest, and slid downward.
The injury swiftly spread to his abdomen, and almost-white crimson flames erupted from Lumian's palm, consuming his mangled flesh.
He willingly accepted increased risk in the future to mitigate the impact of his injuries.

With that, his figure melded into the void.
Just as Mirror Gardner emerged from the dissipating blazing-white flaming spear, Lumian materialized behind him.
Bang! Bang!
Lumian swung his fists again, targeting Mirror Gardner's arms, denying him a chance to catch his breath.
He opted not to strike vital points, fearing that excessive damage might trigger Mirror Substitution.
As Mirror Gardner transformed into a blazing-white spear to assail Lumian, female Lumian, intending to "teleport" over to assist, stood stunned, as if temporarily losing autonomy.
Likewise, both male Franca and male Jenna exhibited similar reactions, as if their resemblance to real people had momentarily waned.
Franca and Jenna, in dire straits, seized the opportunity to catch their breath.
Although they didn't immediately comprehend the reason, they keenly sensed that Mirror Gardner held the key to the problem.
Lumian's assault on the leader had brought about such a change!
Franca, relying on her experience, swiftly instructed Jenna, "Give me that... Cough! Arrow!"
She needed the potent self-healing abilities of the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty to withstand the infectious disease and recuperate to a relatively healthy state within a specific timeframe. Franca aimed to delay female Lumian and the other Mirror People, creating an optimal environment for Lumian to confront Mirror Gardner solo.
Her only hope rested on Lumian catalyzing positive changes before the infection and illness exacerbated, outpacing the effectiveness of her self-healing abilities.
Jenna had intended to use the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty herself. Despite having used it twice already—with another use risking a collapse of her body—she was willing to disregard the consequences in the current dire situation.
However, upon hearing Franca's request, she hesitated momentarily before tossing the obsidian arrow to Franca.
From Jenna's perspective, Franca, a Sequence 6 Demoness of Pleasure armed with numerous mystical items, possessed significantly more strength than herself. Thus, Franca's temporary recovery held greater benefit for the ongoing battle.
Franca caught the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty and plunged it into her chest.
Observing that female Lumian and the other Mirror People had regained their composure, becoming lively once again,

Franca's lake-blue eyes silently transformed to a fiery red. The rubber band securing her ponytail snapped as if corroded, allowing her flaxen-colored hair to billow in the air, enhancing her enchanting allure.
Her increasingly frequent coughs momentarily subsided, and the invisible "spider silk" surrounding her ceased its gradual, silent encroachment on male Franca, male Jenna, and female Lumian, no longer tightening and ensnaring them layer by layer.
Like mirror images, Franca and Jenna felt their bodies grow heavy, their limbs constricted.
From the outset, male Franca had been covertly using spider silk. Only when there was no way to further ensnare them layer by layer in secret did he reveal it.
In an instant, Franca and the others were immobilized. Female Lumian, who had just "teleported" over, was the least affected by the spider silk and was skilled in using flames. She swiftly activated Spirit World Traversal in a crimson light, heading towards Lumian and Mirror Gardner's battlefield.
Taking advantage of the momentary pause in female Anthony's actions, Anthony could finally counterattack.
Enduring the terrifying cough, dizziness, and fever, he raised the revolver purchased from the black market and pulled the trigger at the Mirror Person, clearly more charming than him.
At that moment, no one interrupted their "internecine attacks."
Amidst the gunshots, female Anthony shattered into numerous fragments.
Upon reappearing nearby, she didn't immediately rush to rescue Mirror Gardner. Instead, she continued pursuing Anthony amidst her soaring desire for achievement.
Amidst the sounds of flesh colliding, Lumian landed multiple punches on Mirror Gardner, sending waves of pain through the powerful Beyonder's head and stoking his anger.
His greed made him reluctant to abandon the other four Mirror People and the advantage his side enjoyed on other battlefields. However, if he didn't give up, he wouldn't be able to focus on dealing with Lumian. He found himself restricted in every way and faced a disadvantaged situation.
This was why Lumian had chosen to trigger his Greed!
Bang!
Lumian tightened his fists, delivering a powerful blow to Mirror Gardner.
Mirror Gardner crashed to the ground, instinctively summoning a swarm of crimson, almost white fireballs for protection.
This caught female Lumian off guard as she had just "teleported"

over.
Unfazed by the nearly-white crimson fireballs, Lumian swiftly "teleported" toward Mirror Gardner.
The safest spot was, of course, where the caster stood!
Amidst the explosive chaos, Lumian gritted his teeth against the searing pain in his back and landed another punch on Mirror Gardner's face.
The short thorns on the iron-black boxing gloves pierced through skin and flesh.
Suddenly, Mirror Gardner Martin's gaze froze, blood streaming from his eyes, nose, and other wounds.
The intense greed within him erupted, not killing or knocking him out but weakening and disorienting him.
In this dazed state, whether it was female Lumian, male Franca, male Jenna, or female Anthony, they all froze in place. Their bodies rapidly faded, growing more translucent until they vanished.
Witnessing the scene, Lumian straightened up, removing the Flog boxing gloves. He tossed them to Franca and Jenna, ensuring each had one.
Franca noticed the residual blood and grasped Lumian's intent immediately.
Dipping her hand into the blood, she retrieved a mirror, ready to cast a curse.
Lumian had three reasons for opting for the Flog boxing gloves:
Firstly, the ability to stir desires wouldn't trigger Mirror Substitution. Secondly, as a mystical item, it could attract the attention of dangerous entities, causing unpredictable changes that might lead to opportunities amid the chaos.
Thirdly, it provided a chance to "collect" a curse's medium—the target's blood!
Even if his triggered greed couldn't be controlled, leading to Mirror Gardner's Mirror Substitution, Lumian planned to seize the moment when the other Mirror People were temporarily affected. He would throw the Flog boxing gloves to Franca and Jenna, aiding them in intercepting the attacks.
Repeatedly cursing with the possession of the blood, Lumian aimed to challenge how many times Mirror Substitution could be used and find an opportunity to sever the connection.
Flames erupted around Lumian as he transformed into a fireball, distancing himself from Mirror Gardner.
Just as he was about to remove the Eye of Truth, a peculiar sound caught his attention.

Chapter 490: Sounds

The strange sounds Lumian heard echoed from a far-off realm, an elusive destination beyond his grasp.

His heart tightened as he quickly removed the Eye of Truth, but the sounds remained.

Bam! Bam! Bam! The sounds reverberated as if two massive rocks collided. Lumian witnessed sparks flying, and dried leaves and branches catching fire. In the midst of the flames lay scattered bones. The cave, shrouded in darkness with an unknown depth, echoed with distant howls resembling wolves.

Thud! Thud! Thud! A leather drum's beats and ancient musical instruments resonated, creating a solemn, holy, and magnificent atmosphere for Lumian. The scene in his mind shifted to a vast wilderness with a towering altar. A figure, his face veiled with beaded coverings, a splendid headdress, and a flowing black robe, ascended to the highest point. Around him, people with demon-painted faces danced frenziedly to the drumbeat. Suddenly, the sky darkened, and a face appeared from the ominous clouds. The ritualist, with beads sliding aside, revealed a terrified expression.

A distant, haunting voice pierced the clouds, resonating through the desolate land. Lumian felt a profound shake in his mind and body. Before him stretched vast highlands, with withered trees, sparse grass, and yellow soil and rocks exposed. Gullies crisscrossed like wrinkles on an old man's face, separating silent towns. A massive river surged, majestic yet tainted with turbid yellow.

Ding. Dang. Ding. Dang. The sound, like pearls on a porcelain plate, was crisp and gentle, emanating from a peculiar wooden pavilion. The surrounding buildings burned fiercely, and shouts echoed from the river. Amidst the pleasant melody, the pavilion collapsed in flames, yet the performer continued unabated.

In the midst of the gentle singing, a woman in a peculiar dress stood on the platform, captivatingly expressing herself. Below her, people sat at various tables, savoring drinks under dim lights. Gunshots, like firecrackers, echoed outside what seemed to be a bar's dance floor, as citizens collapsed on the street. Fierce soldiers rushed in, stabbing the struggling ones with bayonets attached to their guns. Distant buildings burned, and flames soared into the sky.

These voices and images surged into Lumian's mind like a torrent, causing his eyes to redden. His head felt unusually swollen, as if it were on the brink of exploding, and his thoughts became a chaotic jumble.

Franca and Jenna, engrossed in their battle against Mirror Gardner Martin, remained oblivious to Lumian's unsettling state.
Franca took the lead, pressing the black flames against the mirror stained with the target's blood. She successfully saw the enemy—weakened by the eruption of desire. He succumbed to the engulfing black flames, inflicting damage to his Spirit Body.
Crack!
Mirror Gardner shattered, and his figure materialized nearby, his dazed eyes now alert.
Seizing the opportunity, Jenna, moving with remarkable speed, adjusted her makeup mirror stained with Mirror Gardner's blood. Pressing the black flames in her hand against it, s
Mirror Gardner was once again ignited by the Demoness's black flames and subjected to another fatal curse.
He shattered anew, reappearing beside the black pillar.
His right hand reached into his pocket, as if he wanted to take out a mirror and use nails, hair, blood, and other media to sever the connection between the source of the curse and himself.
However, Franca, who was also moving at high speed, leaned back and raised the mirror in her hand. It made contact with her other hand, holding the Flog boxing glove ablaze with black flames.
The flames erupted within the mirror, thwarting Mirror Gardner's attempt at curse-evading mirror magic.
The duo, Franca and Jenna, continued their intricate dance—one advancing, one retreating, one cursing, and the other awaiting their turn. It was a mesmerizing duet, a choreography of combat.
After enduring six curses, Mirror Gardner froze in front of a grayish-white stone pillar, not shattering like before.
In the silence of the black flames, he rapidly weakened, teetering on the brink of unconsciousness.
Seeing this, Franca discarded the Flog boxing gloves, opting for her Cannon Gun. She drew the weapon, pulled back the hammer, and took aim at the target.
Bang!
The iron-black bullet tore through Mirror Gardner's skull, shattering it into fragments.
His nearly headless body swayed briefly before collapsing to the ground.
As the corpse faded away, it left behind a peculiar mirror fragment, its surface nearly lightless as if coated with black paint.
Meanwhile, Anthony Reid, ever proficient at observation, detected Lumian's abnormal state. Racing towards him, the Psychiatrist attempted to Placate him. However, Lumian remained unresponsive, his face contorting further, blood vessels on his

forehead bulging ominously.
"There's a situation here!" Anthony, noting Mirror Gardner's demise from the corner of his eye, swiftly informed Franca and Jenna. He hoped that the two Demonesses could find a way to address Lumian's unsettling condition.
However, an instant later, the pitch-black mirror fragment emitted a faint light.
The surroundings plunged into instant darkness, transmuting into a bizarre transparency, as if the entire world had transformed into a mirrored container.
Within the dark and shadowy confines of this mirror container, an unseen force seethed with rage, materializing the air and exerting pressure from every direction.
Though Franca, Jenna, and Anthony witnessed no visible or audible phenomena, an overwhelming fear gripped them. Their bodies felt as if plunged into an icy cavern, freezing instantaneously.
A faint sigh, distinctly feminine, resonated suddenly.
Nearby, the black pillar radiated a dim light. The tiny snake-like black hairs concealed in the void retracted, coalescing into a massive black-haired sphere, forming a protective barrier around the square.
Franca and the others experienced an immediate sense of tranquility. Fear released its grip on their bodies and minds, allowing them to move freely.
Meanwhile, Lumian's consciousness wrestled with an onslaught of voices and scenes, his rationality gradually eroding.
Suddenly, he heard a voice.
It was a male sigh.
Then, he saw a face and a figure—a man seated cross-legged in a serene room, adorned with a headdress and a blue robe.
Though handsome, the man's eyes betrayed profound sorrow and pain, lending him a withered appearance.
His gaze fixed on Lumian, comprehending the scenes unfolding, and he picked up a brown rod adorned with numerous white silk strands at one end, resting beside him.
As the sigh persisted, the myriad sounds and images Lumian perceived vanished, replaced by overlapping shrill cries akin to curses.
While Lumian couldn't comprehend the language, the phrase echoed in his mind, infused with the purest knowledge, enabling him to grasp its meaning.
The voices converged into a torrent, laden with resentment and hatred.

"Celestial Master!"

...

At the base of the Deep Valley Quarry, the once busy hall now stood in partial ruins. The tumultuous activity had taken its toll, leaving many members of the Machinery Hivemind injured. Conscious of the need to avoid hindering their comrades' battles, these individuals strategically retreated.

Claude, the mechanical giant, abruptly halted his movements, his colossal ears resonating with overlapping roars.

Amidst the roars, a sigh descended from above, casting an eerie atmosphere upon the indistinct wilderness.

In that wild expanse, numerous ethereal figures lingered, occasionally gazing at the sky and emitting haunting screams.

Observing this mysterious transformation, Archbishop Horamick refrained from seizing the opportunity to attack Claude directly. Instead, he swiftly withdrew from the crumbling hall, leading the remaining members of the Machinery Hivemind away from the illusory wilderness.

The cybernetic eyes of the mechanical giant, with one resembling a ruby and the other an emerald, suddenly dimmed.

It appeared as if intelligence had deserted him. Slowly turning around, Claude stepped into the surreal "wilderness," seemingly intent on joining the lingering figures.

Midway through, the mechanical giant turned to regard Archbishop Horamick and his companions, gears spinning loudly.

An indescribable smile graced the face comprising multiple metallic components.

In the next instant, the mechanical giant retracted his gaze, resuming his forward journey.

His figure gradually took on an illusionary quality, merging with the mysterious wilderness until both vanished into the unknown.

...

In the depths of the Fourth Epoch Trier, adjacent to the wall-like grayish-white fog, Magician and Justice materialized, their intense gazes fixed upon Lady Moon. She had lost her veil, revealing a vacant expression.

The bestowed of the Great Mother, the lady who had nurtured a deity, stood in front of the gray fog, her shadow tainted by char.

Magician and Justice were surprised to see this.

Almost simultaneously, the wall-like grayish-white fog expanded, pulsating like a beating heart.

Almost simultaneously, an imposing aura, one that seemed to look down upon all existence, permeated the surroundings. It quelled the earlier sigh that had echoed through the air.

The grayish-white fog in the vicinity heightened its intensity, spreading in all directions once more, thickening the gray fog throughout the entirety of Fourth Epoch Trier.
"Him?"
"So it's Him?"
Justice and Magician exchanged silent whispers. Unaffected by the adverse consequences targeting others, they persisted in their actions.
The dazed Lady Moon immediately found herself shrouded in resplendent starlight.
...
In the wilderness, Snarner Einhorn and Diest, the President of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, continued their struggle to restrain Vermonda Sauron—a Calamity Giant, an Angel who had lost control. Their efforts, however, were met with fierce counterattacks, forcing Them into a gradual retreat, unable to capitalize on the situation.
Amidst the chaos, the gray fog shrouding the ruins of Fourth Epoch Trier stirred violently, as if the very city had awakened.
The turbulent fog swiftly coalesced into a spear-like form, a weapon capable of shattering mountain peaks. It hurtled towards the captive Vermonda Sauron.
In an instant, the spear, crafted from the gray fog, erupted into violent flames, taking on a violet hue. It exuded an aura of supremacy, as if it aimed to conquer all in its path.
Witnessing this surreal phenomenon, whether it was Snarner Einhorn, Diest, Vermonda Sauron, or their allies, it was as though they beheld a city enshrouded in fog. A sense of awe overwhelmed their bodies and minds, dissuading any inclination to resist.
The majestic purple flaming spear traversed a significant distance, impaling Vermonda Sauron—the Calamity Giant yet to regain mobility. His chest rent open, the colossal being was pinned to the wilderness.
As the purple flames dissipated, a figure stood up from a genuflecting position.
Clad in blood-stained black armor, adorned with long red hair, the youth exuded a handsome yet haunting presence. Rotting wounds marred both sides of his face, and a vivid red mark resembling a banner flag adorned his forehead.

Chapter 491: Unexpected "Helper"

The gray fog encircling Fourth Epoch Trier extended into the wilderness, as if intercepting and obstructing an unseen force.

In the midst of the tempest, Snarner, Diest, and the other formidable beings felt a high and formidable aura. An instinctive urge to bow in submission washed over them. It was as if the Blood Emperor Alista Tudor, who had met His end deep in Fourth Epoch Trier, had returned from the abyss. However, He wasn't as unhinged or violent as before. Instead, a veiled sense of danger and calamity lingered.

Fighting the impulse to surrender while stepping back, Their eyes fixated on the figure of a young man clad in blood-stained black armor, adorned with long red hair and a conspicuous red mark between his brows.

Their nerves tensed as a name echoed in their minds:

Medici!

Red Angel Medici!

He was a king from ancient times. As early as the Fourth Epoch, or even during the catastrophic demise of the Third Epoch, he held the title of King of Angels.

Kings of Angels were Archangels beyond Sequence 1, yet They hadn't attained the level of a Sequence 0 true god. Through the consumption of multiple Sequence 1 potions or the possession of the key to deity status, However, having something missing prevented Them from taking that crucial step.

The Red Angel was among the eight Kings of Angels who had once served the Ancient Sun God. Though He met his end at the hands of Alista Tudor during the Fourth Epoch, leading to the latter's ascent as Blood Emperor, the King of Angels hadn't completely perished. Transformed into an evil spirit in a hidden sanctuary, He survived and reemerged a few years ago, resuming His activities.

As Angels of the Hunter pathway, Snarner and Diest grew increasingly apprehensive about the situation. They suspected that Medici might have already acquired a Conqueror Beyonder characteristic, ascending once again to a Sequence 1 Archangel.

While devising a plan to obtain Vermonda Sauron's Conqueror Beyonder characteristic, Snarner and Diest remained cautious of the possible involvement of the ancient king. When Albus Medici disclosed his name, Their vigilance heightened, and They kept a constant watch on him. Only when the operation was unexpectedly hastened, and the Red Angel showed no signs of breaching the seal, nor did Albus Medici display any abnormal behavior, did they finally ease up.

But just at that critical juncture, Red Angel Medici appeared!
With a terror-inducing aura that subjugated everything, He soared majestically from the depths of Fourth Epoch Trier. Seizing the opportunity, he dealt a severe blow to Vermonda Sauron with a single strike.
Medici's disdainful gaze swept across Snarner and Diest as He casually tossed an item to the struggling Calamity Giant, Vermonda Sauron.
It was a blood-stained umbilical cord.
The moment the umbilical cord left Medici's hand, it burst into flames, emitting a golden light resembling a miniature sun.
Above surface Trier, the sun, engulfed by hurricanes, lightning, and torrential rain, suddenly emitted a blinding light, tearing through the calamitous scene.
A chubby baby, seemingly crafted from pure sunlight, soared out of the tear, transforming into a golden sun hurtling towards Red Swan Castle in Quartier Éraste.
The scorching sun tore through the sky, liquefying the spires, walls, and floor of the ancient castle. It plunged into the depths of the underground maze and into the bronze coffin.
Wherever it passed, darkness dissipated, and the withered hearts turned to ashes. Elros Einhorn, stationed outside the underground palace, instinctively shut her eyes, her body trembling uncontrollably.
High in the sky, The Hanged Man didn't pursue the self-destructing sun. Instead, he hovered above the storm, his gaze fixed on Red Swan Castle, which bore a massive wound. It remained unknown what he contemplated.
Danitz, leading his team in Quartier Éraste's battle against the mutated soldiers and the monstrous Carbonari army, couldn't help but curse under the intense sunlight.
The people around him and the mutants shared a similar reaction.
In the outer seal of Fourth Epoch Trier, an invisible flame burning silently in the sky formed a massive vortex, tainted with a golden hue.
The sun descended from the vortex, illuminating the entire wilderness and Fourth Epoch Trier as if it were daytime.
It caught up to the burning umbilical cord and enveloped the severely injured Archangel, Vermonda Sauron.
Sunlight erupted, and darkness vanished. The Calamity Giant, formed by a Conqueror's loss of control, emitted a tragic cry and swiftly dissipated, undergoing profound purification.
The infant that had transformed into a sun ceased to exist. Only the remnants of its power burned fiercely, emitting light and

warmth.
Snarner, Diest, and the other powerhouses turned sideways, steeling themselves to withstand the impact of the sunlight.
...
In the brilliantly lit Fourth Epoch Trier,
Voisin Sanson and Madame Pualis, entangled in intense combat, simultaneously closed their eyes, as if unaccustomed to the direct sunlight.
Upon reopening their eyes, they found themselves separated, no longer able to see each other. One stood in a square adorned with stone pillars, while the other perched on a collapsed black building.
"Wh..." The two bestowed, who had already tasted the power of godhood, were momentarily taken aback before realizing that Fourth Epoch Trier had undergone a transformation due to the impact of the golden sunlight, leading to a shift in direction and spatial disarray.
...
Gardner Martin, donned in a full-body silver armor, could already discern the dense grayish-white fog ahead, resembling an impenetrable wall. A surge of joy coursed through him.
What he desired, what he sought, was within reach.
Suddenly, sunlight pierced through, illuminating the nocturnal environment.
Instinctively, Gardner Martin shut his eyes and decelerated.
Then, a cracking sound reverberated.
It emanated from his neck.
In surprise, Gardner Martin lowered his head, acclimating to the sunlight.
Accompanied by an intense and peculiar pain, he witnessed the widening gap between his head and chest. Blood spurted from the stump of his neck, staining the area crimson.
He also beheld his white, bloody spine.
How could this be... This thought flashed through Gardner Martin's mind, a mix of shock and fear.
He had always believed himself to be the favored one, the special one. Hence, under the watchful eyes of the great will deep within Fourth Epoch Trier, even upon entering 13 Avenue du Marché, he assumed he would only suffer minor corruption. He could wield a certain power from Fourth Epoch Trier to a limited extent without transforming into a terrifying monster like Olson, whose head and body had been severed.
Yet now, his head had detached from his body, dragging along his spine. Just as he was on the verge of approaching the great will!

...
Lady Moon, adorned with brown wings and bird-like claws, crumpled amidst cascading silver lightning.
Initially, she descended into madness, morphing into a bewildered monster. This marked the onset of the Plague Storm from the Spectator pathway, succeeded by Magician's nine attacks from nine directions.
As sunlight bathed the scene, Magician instinctively closed her eyes. With a sweep of her right hand, the void contorted, shaping into a sealed dark sphere that encased her, Justice, and the swiftly fading Lady Moon. Together, they withstood the ensuing anomalies as a unified entity.
...
Within the sphere woven from thick black hair, Jenna, Franca, and Anthony felt the tumultuous storm and various catastrophes outside, causing the ground to quake and the sphere to sway.
In an instant, time slowed, and the snake-like black hair composing the dark sphere swiftly split open, revealing a beam of sunlight above.
In the sunlight, Jenna and Franca seemed to discern an ethereal female voice.
"Reconcile with your mirror self..."
With these words, the snake-like black hair disintegrated entirely, no longer coalescing into a sphere. It retreated into the void.
Franca and the others found themselves surrounded by a layer of dark glass, silently shattering and falling under the sunlight.
The lights and figures in the nearby buildings vanished, and Jenna and the others returned to the dead silence reminiscent of when they first entered the ruins.
After adjusting to the sunlight, Anthony immediately looked at Lumian and noticed that the blood vessels on his companion's face had faded. His contorted expression gradually eased.
"Are you alright?" Anthony inquired, employing Placate.
Upon hearing the roars, Lumian's mind was filled by the man's sighs in the dark room. The overwhelming knowledge that gripped him in corruption had subsided. He no longer felt like his head was about to burst or lose his rationality.
He quickly returned to normal, no longer hearing the sigh or seeing the withered man in strange attire.
"I survived," Lumian replied to Anthony's question.
Simultaneously, he thought, Is that the Celestial Master the Armored Shadow mentioned?
Using the Eye of Truth here is even more dangerous than the outside world.

Franca gathered the items, picked up Flog and other belongings, and threw out the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty.
"What happened to you just now?"
"The aftereffects of using the Eye of Truth." Lumian took the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty and stabbed it into his chest. Surveying the area, he said, "Let's quickly collect our items and relocate."
Previously, he had used Flog, hoping to attract the attention of dangerous entities, thereby creating chaos to find an opportunity. Now that Mirror Gardner had been dealt with, it was crucial to move to avoid new threats.
Jenna, with no time to ponder the meaning of reconciling with her mirror self, placed the bone flute, wooden box, and other items in the blood-stained cloak. Following Lumian, Franca, and Anthony, she sprinted in a random direction around the black pillar.
...
Beneath the blistering sunlight, the purple flames constituting Vermonda Sauron's flesh and blood flickered out one by one. The anguished faces representing the diverse Sauron family members disappeared sequentially.
The Red Angel's form abruptly expanded, resembling a diminutive mountain peak.
Brandishing a broadsword condensed from purple flames, He advanced with a step and swung it at the dying Vermonda Sauron.
Having regained their composure, Snarner, Diest, and the other formidable beings were not inclined to yield. They acted in unison, intervening to impede Him.

Chapter 492: Pride

Red Angel Medici stood unfazed amidst the onslaught from Snarner, Diest, and the other formidable adversaries. His focus unwavering, He channeled His conquering will to subdue Vermonda Sauron, wielding a broadsword ablaze with purple flames, ready to cleave through the menacing foe.

Seizing the opportune moment, with the uncontrollable Calamity Giant at its weakest, Medici aimed to deliver the final, fatal blow!

Suddenly, a radiant light burst forth before the eyes of Snarner, Diest, and the rest. It was pure sunlight, banishing the darkness and cleansing the surroundings of filth and the stench of blood. The two Angels, now in their Mythical Creature forms, appeared as if exposed to the brilliance of the sun at close range.

From within the luminous glow emerged a holy and beautiful woman, draped in a white robe adorned with golden threads—Trier's guardian angel, Saint Vièvе!

She shielded the Red Angel from the relentless attacks of the other powerhouses.

Simultaneously, Medici, clad in blood-stained black armor, descended like a mountain. Plunging the purple broadsword into Vermonda Sauron's skull, which showed signs of melting under the intense sunlight, Medici marked the decisive moment in the battle.

Boom!

The implosion absorbed the surrounding flames, hurricanes, lightning, hail, and sunlight into the Calamity Giant's colossal form. The once tumultuous wilderness now stood cleansed, except for the remnants of invisible flames in the sky and a vast golden vortex.

Boom!

Reaching its limit, the implosion rapidly expanded, unleashing a barrage of projectiles. A violent hurricane tore through Vermonda Sauron's charred skeleton, casting darkness upon the once brightly illuminated landscape.

A torrential downpour accompanied by countless bolts of lightning and thunderclaps ensued, marking the demise of an Angel—a Conqueror.

Snarner, Diest, and the other powerhouses, breaking through Saint Vièvе's obstruction, witnessed the scene unfold. Vermonda Sauron's body disintegrated, and Red Angel Medici, now in the form of a Mythical Creature, brandished His purple-flamed broadsword. He turned disdainfully, mocking those who dared challenge Him.

Snarner Einhorn narrowed His eyes, evaluating the situation. Swiftly transforming into a blaze, He ascended into the air, disappearing into the colossal vortex of formless flames.
Realizing that even with the support of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, victory against Red Angel and Saint Vièvе was unattainable, He chose to retreat.
The former was undoubtedly a Sequence 1 Conqueror. Moreover, in this unique setting, He appeared capable of tapping into the formidable power hidden within the Fourth Epoch Trier to some extent!
In that situation, He'd fall back and escape if needed; otherwise, He could meet His end right here!
Snarner dashed into the massive vortex in midair, while Diest morphed into a beam of light and shot into the sky. He raced out of the wilderness with Tony Twain, chasing after the Einhorn family's Weather Warlock.
As Angels of the Hunter pathway, Their judgments and choices were strikingly similar.
Red Angel Medici, observing Their departure, chuckled and muttered to Himself, "The heroic escape of your descendant is reminiscent of yours many years ago."
His attention then turned to Saint Vièvе with a smile.
"Now, we can proceed to the final part of the plan and eliminate the bestowed of the Outer Deities."
Saint Vièvе nodded in agreement, emitting a blazing light as She flew towards Fourth Epoch Trier, enveloped in a shroud of gray fog.
...
In the depths of Fourth Epoch Trier, alongside a wall-like grayish-white fog, Bernadette Gustav, the eldest daughter of Emperor Roselle, fixated Her gaze on a seal adorned with countless mysterious symbols.
In Her palm, a faint golden figure materialized once more through the viscous light emanating from a golden lamp that resembled a miniature lamp.
It said to Bernadette, "Take another step forward and find a monster to 'replace' your wish using the method I told you. I can use Under-the-table Transaction to help you obtain something from here to counterbalance the corruption affecting your father."
Bernadette remained steadfast, not advancing. Calmly, she responded, "I entered this place to analyze the seal and understand how the various corruptions have intricately balanced themselves through years of mergers and confrontations. That sigh was merely an unexpected bonus."
"Time is of the essence. If you don't act more assertively, once the

Mother Goddess of Depravity breaches the barrier, your father will truly transform into a monster," warned the distorted, blurry, pale-golden figure.
Undeterred, Bernadette continued absorbing knowledge related to the seal, her focus unwavering.
The pale-golden figure fell silent and retreated into the peculiar lamp without making further persuasion.
...
Gardner Martin's head, donned with a silver-white helmet, soared into the air, carrying his blood-soaked spine with it.
Glancing down, he witnessed a broadsword of light materializing in his hand.
He—no, his body could use the Pride Armor's Hurricane of Light again!
However, this time, the target appeared to be him—specifically, his head!
Is this the traitorous curse? My own body turning against my head... *Why another betrayal?* Could it be linked to constant wearing of the Pride Armor? Gardner Martin's pupils dilated, fear gripping his heart.
In a desperate attempt to mitigate the impending impact of the Hurricane of Light, he condensed numerous crimson, almost white fireballs. The explosions around him aimed to lessen the force of the onslaught. Simultaneously, he sank his consciousness into his glabella, seeking a connection with the great will, praying for its protective intervention.
...
Beside the shattered corpse of Vermonda Sauron, Red Angel Medici extended His right hand, observing as a beam of light, reminiscent of iron and blood, emanated from the Conqueror's body. It landed on the damaged skull cradled in His palm.
In that moment, Gardner Martin's desperate shout and plea reached Him.
Red Angel chuckled dismissively, paying no heed to the pawn that had served its purpose and was now deemed expendable.
Gardner Martin had not submitted to the great will from the depths of Fourth Epoch Trier but to Red Angel Himself!
Over the past few years, Red Angel Medici had lurked in the shadows, orchestrating a scheme to obtain the Sauron family's lost Sequence 1 Conqueror Beyonder characteristic. Leveraging His uniqueness and level, He assisted numerous members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order in maintaining their lucidity and rationality in the face of corruption at 13 Avenue du Marché. They did not transform into monsters but were only slightly affected.

Using His uniqueness, Medici disguised Himself as a great will from the depths of Fourth Epoch Trier, He manipulated the Iron and Blood Cross Order members to grasp the underground situation and pinpoint Vermonda Sauron's exact location.
During this process, He uncovered the issue with the Mirror People but refrained from interference, pushing the plan forward. His intention was to involve Trier's evil god bestowed and utilize them to divert the attention of other factions while extracting corresponding special value and uncovering hidden problems.
As the plan unfolded, Philip informed Gardner Martin about Lumian Lee, who had undoubtedly prayed to the great will.
Seizing this opportunity, Red Angel Medici refined the plan, bestowing Gardner Martin with a divine vision. This allowed him to acquire significant mysticism knowledge and "conceive" the Hostel ritual.
The ritual, designed to create minimal disturbance and increase the chances of success, aimed to "fool" Trier's most formidable evil god bestowed into Fourth Epoch Trier. The ultimate goal: capture them all and purify them in one fell swoop!
Observing the Beyonder characteristic rapidly condense in His hand, Red Angel Medici raised His gaze to the gradually shrinking golden vortex.
The smile on His face, adorned with decaying wounds, deepened.
Whether it was the Hostel plan or the original strategy involving the special mirror world, both required the cooperation of a faction and the assistance of a true god.
Enter the Eternal Blazing Sun!
Indeed, how can the sun, intolerant of darkness, filth, and humbleness, genuinely collaborate with the Mother, the symbol of depravity and evil?
Having ascended to godhood and abandoned His original Lord in the past, He had chosen this path precisely because He refused to submit to another deity. Why would He now bow to the Mother Goddess of Depravity, an Outer Deity, a different entity altogether?
His needs and acknowledgments were reserved for a collaborator. And I willingly embraced this role. Even if I were to become a Great Old One in the future, I vowed to honor this agreement and stand together in defense as a collaborator.
With the Ruler of War's divine spot vacant and Cheek in dire straits, I emerged as the most likely candidate to ascend to true godhood and attain the status of a Great Old One in a short span.
The Sun didn't repent or return to the original Lord's side, nor did He submit to the Mother Goddess of Depravity who reigned above the gods. Instead, He chose the path of enduring pressure and

facing the worst possible outcome to support a new Great Old One.
This decision may have seemed nearly the worst, yet He embraced it wholeheartedly.
Because He is the proud Sun.
Through the golden vortex, the Red Angel's gaze surveyed the gradually calming storm above Trier, noting a significant decrease in the frequency of lightning.
His smile grew even more smug.
As expected, Tyrant and the old dragon have grasped the entirety of the situation. They are no longer seizing the opportunity to confront the Sun, rendering the entity that had inherited most of the original Lord's legacy effectively useless.
They, too, yearn for the emergence of a new Great Old One.
Red Angel Medici directed His gaze to His palm, where an iron-black object, resembling a blood-stained crown, was on the verge of taking shape.
Recollections of past events and the betrayal He had only comprehended a few years ago flooded His mind. It all stemmed from His unwavering loyalty to that Lord of 2,401 years.
His choice was unforgiving. He chose to collaborate with the Eternal Blazing Sun.
This was because He was also a proud King of Angels, once the most loyal Red Angel.
As the Sequence 1 Conqueror Beyonder characteristic fully condensed, Medici chuckled and declared, "The curse of your useless descendants can end now."
He pressed the blood-stained iron crown, formed by the broken skull in His hand, between His eyebrows and devoured it without concocting a potion.
Vermonda Sauron's blood and shattered corpse, scattered across the wilderness, seemed to come alive, pouring into the Red Angel's body like a torrent.

Chapter 493: Crimson Hell

Sprinting through the silent, desolate, and dilapidated Fourth Epoch Trier, Lumian's abdominal injuries came under control, thanks to his potent self-healing abilities. It seemed they wouldn't worsen any time soon.

Beneath the sunlight, the direction in which Lumian, Franca, and the others were heading appeared to be in complete disarray. They traversed narrow, partially destroyed streets only to encounter magnificent red buildings, and attempts to reach landmarks led them further away, regardless of the directions they took.

Fortunately, the four of them remained relatively close, avoiding the perils of getting "lost" or separated from the group.

As Lumian contemplated finding a place to hide, a large number of violent fragments of light materialized in front of them.

It was evident that the power emanating from the Fourth Epoch Trier had been transferred from a distance.

Lumian and the others were no strangers to this terrifying storm of light. They had encountered it once in the wilderness, courtesy of Gardner Martin's silver-white full-body armor.

Gardner Martin? Lumian halted in time, wisely refraining from rushing into the weakened but still perilous storm of light.

Franca's expression became complicated, uncertain whether this encounter was luck or misfortune.

As the light subsided, she witnessed Gardner Martin's head, a long, blood-stained spine trailing behind. His armor was incomplete, his face covered in charred and hideous wounds. The helmet had caved in, revealing his grayish-white brain faintly. His eyes appeared empty, unfocused, and filled with dizziness, as if he had experienced an exaggerated shock from the intense impact.

Gardner Martin's adversary stood as his silver-white armor-clad body, lacking a head. The neck stump was drenched in blood.

Raising his hands, he condensed a massive axe made of light.

Though incapable of unleashing the Hurricane of Light, it proved sufficient for ordinary combat.

Franca gazed at the familiar yet unfamiliar tragic face and exhaled. She took out a mirror and reflected it.

In that moment, Gardner Martin's thoughts returned to normal. Aside from his headless body, he saw Franca's beautiful lake-colored eyes, appearing calm.

Franca placed her right hand, engulfed in black flames, on the mirror reflecting Gardner Martin's head and whispered, "I'll liberate you."

Gardner Martin, still reeling from the immense blow to his body,

found himself instantly enveloped by black flames, his spirituality igniting from within.
Struggling to scream, he discovered his voice stifled. Desiring aid from the great will and attempting to utilize his uniqueness to summon Fourth Epoch Trier's bestowed power, he encountered only silence.
With a whoosh, the headless Gardner Martin wielded the radiant axe, striking the head's face. The missing visor shattered, and the axe cleaved into the skull.
Lumian, having taken a few steps to the side, raised his right hand, unleashing a crimson fireball, almost white, like a cannonball aimed at Gardner Martin's sunken skull.
The fireball landed on the crack, exploding and tearing apart the unprotected grayish-white brain.
Under the relentless assault from his body, lover, and subordinate, Gardner Martin's head and eyes bulged, filled with hatred and pain.
With a snap, the head detached from the helmet, falling to the ground in a half-broken state, devoid of vitality or movement.
As the silver helmet landed, Gardner Martin, still clad in armor, spun around, raising the glowing axe and charging at Lumian and the others.
Observing the unfolding scene, Lumian subtly arched his body and advanced confidently.
With each step, his stature appeared to expand, and by the time he stood near the headless Gardner Martin, his clothes and pants strained against his growing form.
The power of an Ascetic!
During his time at the edge of Fourth Epoch Trier, Lumian had strategically "Compressed" some of his strength. Now, he was unleashing it.
Although the accumulated strength wasn't overwhelming, it had visibly transformed him. Coupled with the enhanced speed, agility, and physique granted by the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty, Lumian was confident in withstanding the impending attack from the silver armor-clad Gardner Martin.
Just as the collision became imminent, Lumian deftly sidestepped, allowing the axe of light to cleave through the air. He swiftly punched the headless Gardner's wrist.
With a resounding bang, the headless Gardner discarded the radiant axe, clenched his metal-gloved fist, and delivered a forceful strike against Lumian.
Lumian's body swayed slightly, while the headless Gardner stood like an unwavering mountain peak.

Retracting his left fist, Lumian released it, swinging it in the air to alleviate the pain as he prepared to strike with his right fist.
At that moment, Franca, having vanished while Lumian approached the headless Gardner, reappeared behind the enemy clad in silver armor.
Raising the iron-black ring on her left thumb, her eyes illuminated like lightning.
Unsure if the headless body could still be affected by Psychic Piercing, Franca believed it should be possible. As long as there was a spirit, Psychic Piercing could exert its influence.
In an instant, the headless Gardner froze. The exposed skin and flesh on his neck and chest twitched.
Jenna, who had been slower due to reciting incantations and using materials, arrived as well. Revealing herself at a distance from the headless Gardner, she caused black flames to condense and fly out, landing on the enemy's bloody neck, unprotected by the silver armor. This ignited the spirit in a state of pain.
Thud! Thud! Thud! Anthony Reid sprinted past Jenna, closing the gap between him and the headless Gardner.
Then, his pupils turned vertical, a faint golden hue coloring them.
Frenzy!
Suddenly, flames erupted from the headless body in the silver armor, scorching its flesh.
Upon witnessing this, Lumian leaned back, kicking the ground with his right foot to "fly" away from the headless Gardner. Simultaneously, he condensed crimson fireballs, nearly white, around him.
The fireballs whizzed through the unprotected neck and into the body, detonating from the inside out with a resounding rumble. The silver armor trembled violently as the headless body was reduced to charred flesh and blood, "painting" the inner layer of the armor.
Boom!
Lumian, propelled backward by the explosion's waves, landed on the ground.
Simultaneously, the silver-armored mountain collapsed to the ground.
Just as Lumian rose and prepared to commend Franca and the others for their coordinated effort, he suddenly sensed the sky transforming into a deep shade of blood-red.
Rain drops began to descend from above.
However, it wasn't rain. It was flames—blazing-white flames.
Within this fiery deluge, droplets of blood accompanied the falling fire.

Franca swiftly rolled towards a nearby building, utilizing its extended roof as cover from the scorching-white fire rain. Lumian, Jenna, and Anthony followed suit.
White-hot flames and drops of bright red blood fell at an increasingly rapid pace, painting the surroundings in hues of red and setting buildings ablaze.
The burning structures melded into a sea of flames.
Contemplating whether to activate the Blood Emperor's aura for potential solutions to the unfolding horror, Lumian's eyes caught sight of Madam Magician, clad in a knot shirt and beige dress.
A sigh of relief escaped him.
Resplendent starlight illuminated the scene, and they vanished from the street, taking with them the Pride Armor, Gardner Martin's corpse, and various items scattered on the ground, all converging into the diminishing golden vortex in the sky.
...
Blazing-white flames, mixed with blood, cascaded down, but they passed through Bernadette Gustav's form, unable to ignite Her.
It was as if the Angel existed beyond their reach.
Her focus remained on the dense gray fog and the diverse corruptions within the city. After a moment, Her body transformed into transparency, eventually disintegrating into a pile of bubbles that mirrored the flames.
As the bubbles dispersed, so did Bernadette, departing from Fourth Epoch Trier.
...
Two elegant women with captivating eyes approached the wall-like grayish-white fog, only to realize that the sky above was tainted with blood, and dense white flames, resembling raindrops, descended.
Just as they considered seeking shelter, a golden sun suddenly reflected in their eyes.
In the blink of an eye, they were entirely purified.
Elsewhere in Fourth Epoch Trier, the Hostel residents who had ventured within were already undergoing abnormalities. Some perished, transformed into monsters, others were engulfed in incandescent white flames, and a few caught sight of the sun.
...
Madame Pualis discovered a relatively intact asymmetrical house amidst the chaos.
Observing distant sunlight and blazing-white flames setting nearby buildings ablaze, she hesitated to seek refuge within the door due to the deep, terrifying darkness within.
Suddenly, her head throbbed violently, and she heard an almost

illusory cry of a baby.
It was the cry of her child, a fragment of memory echoing nearby.
Driven by the mystical sensation, Madame Pulias ventured into the infinite darkness beyond the door.
...
Amidst the incandescent white flames that descended, Voisin Sanson, positioned in the collapsed square, was set ablaze. However, he promptly reverted to his original state.
Soon after, he witnessed his impending purification by the sun.
In that moment, his peripheral vision captured a figure emerging from behind a grayish-white stone pillar at the square's edge.
It was a diaphanous, indistinct lizard-like creature.
The creature's cold eyes silently observed him.
...
In Fourth Epoch Trier, numerous buildings were engulfed by incandescent white flames, their facades now tainted red by rainwater transformed from blood and charred black by the inferno.
Red Angel Medici, donned in blood-stained black armor, emerged from the wilderness into the resplendent city, now permeated with the air of destruction.
He navigated through the charred and collapsed houses, moving amidst falling white flames and beneath blood-like raindrops, a visible smile gracing His face.
The two decaying wounds on His face, exposing the bones beneath, had already started to heal, leaving behind marks resembling a mouth.
Splash.
Flames and blood cascaded from the sky, casting a fiery glow upon Fourth Epoch Trier and shrouding the ruins, transforming it into a crimson hell.
After 2,081 years, Medici had once again ascended to the title of King of Angels.

Chapter 494: "Stolen" Information

The looming dark clouds over Trier had vanished, replaced by the glow of the crimson moonlight that bathed every nook and cranny of the city, casting reflections in the calf-deep puddles below.

On the rooftop of an unknown building, Lumian and Franca materialized at the edge. Before them, Magician hovered in the void, accompanied by a stack of items. Jenna and Anthony, encased in what seemed like dark glass, fixated their gazes elsewhere.

Without prompting from Lumian, Magician let out a weary sigh and divulged, "Medici has ascended once again to King of Angels. Once hailed as the most formidable Conspirer, He has returned."

"The Red Angel who once served the Ancient Sun God and met His demise at the hands of the Blood Emperor, Medici?" Lumian's reaction was a mix of surprise and inevitability.

How could the Angel of the Hunter pathway not be entangled in the affairs of the Sauron family's secrets and Fourth Epoch Trier?

The existence of Albus Medici was irrefutable proof!

Lumian, previously under the impression that the clandestine nature of the Hostel ritual and its premature commencement had prevented the Red Angel from exacting influence, now realized Medici was apparently the ultimate victor.

Madam Magician, in a relatively composed manner, chuckled and remarked, "No need for the latter half of that statement. It makes it sound like you're provoking Him, especially with the Blood Emperor's aura mark still imprinted on your right hand."

Franca, having heard Lumian's mention of the Medici family, inquired out of curiosity, "What did the Red Angel do?"

As she spoke, her eyes flitted towards Jenna and Anthony, only to realize they were oblivious to the conversation with Madam Magician, as if trapped in another dimension.

Behind Franca, the water that had pooled on the rooftop began its gradual retreat, the drain's sloshing sounds echoing.

Magician sighed.

"When the Einhorn family's Angel, the powerhouses of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, and the Sealed Artifacts, along with the unique powers of the Fourth Epoch Trier, were on the brink of killing the out-of-control Vermonda Sauron, He seized the moment to terminate the entire battle and acquire the Sequence 1 Beyonder characteristic.

"The blood-colored sky and the fiery rain you witnessed were the aftermath of His return as a King of Angels in Fourth Epoch Trier."

That explains it... Lumian, recalling the situation, gained a

firsthand understanding of the dread and power wielded by a King of Angels.
At that moment, his feet were bare, lacking shoes and socks—the consequence of being transported to the painted world while asleep. The painted footwear he later wore was evidently short-lived.
Pondering the recent events, he inquired, "Was that roaring giant the out-of-control Vermonda Sauron?"
No wonder the roar had nearly rendered them unconscious. Thankfully, Mr. Fool's gray fog had provided protection.
"That's correct. Vermonda Sauron's loss of control and descent into the sealed underground marked the beginning of the Sauron family's downfall. While many details remain shrouded in mystery, the overall picture is becoming clearer."
Angel of the Einhorn family... Lumian connected the dots, realizing that one of Elros Einhorn and the Iron and Blood Cross Order's primary objectives was to break the seal, hunt the out-of-control Vermonda Sauron, and obtain the Sequence 1 Beyonder characteristic. Lumian nodded thoughtfully and asked with uncertainty, "Did these powerhouses enter Fourth Epoch Trier through the Hostel ritual?"
"Most of them accessed it through the underground leakage of Salle de Bal Brise triggered by the Hostel ritual. The representative from the Einhorn family entered through the leakage deep within the underground palace of Red Swan Castle, but it's essentially a result of the chain reaction caused by the Hostel ritual. As for how the Red Angel entered, that remains unknown to me." Magician's expression turned serious. "However, there's reason to believe that the Hostel ritual was orchestrated by the Red Angel. He manipulated the Iron and Blood Cross Order and Gardner Martin. Truly befitting the entity that once guided and watched over Amon."
Lumian felt a surge of enlightenment, finding that many previously confusing details now made more sense.
Franca's emotions were a mix of complexity.
Madam Magician, glancing at them, offered consolation, "Regardless of the circumstances, our actions accelerated the Hostel ritual, mitigating the damage this plan inflicted on Trier. In the entire market district, only a handful of night duty personnel from places like Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman and Rist Docks bore the brunt of the disaster. Some soldiers lost their lives in other areas. Overall, the impact was mainly financial. Our efforts were not in vain."
She smiled self-deprecatingly and gazed up at the sky.

"The only unexpected thing was that They chose to cooperate."
They... Lumian and Franca thought inwardly.
Eager to uncover who the Red Angel collaborated with, they realized that Madam Magician had no intention of revealing that information.
The lady's eyes traveled over the silver-white full-body armor, Gardner Martin's remains, and the items Jenna had discarded during the battle. She smiled and offered, "I'll assist you in handling the corresponding corruption and throw in specific usage information as a bonus for this mission.
"By the way, I recommend you temporarily overlook the corruption on the bone flute. It can produce peculiar effects. With Gardner Martin's Beyonder characteristics, you don't necessarily need Philip's. Plus, your unique attributes can effectively counteract the negative effects of the bone flute."
The last sentence was directed at Lumian.
Observing Lumian's nod, Magician continued, "This wooden box serves as an under-the-table transaction. It's not meant for combat, but it can resolve many issues that violence can't under specific circumstances. I'll jot down the details and have the messenger send them over.
"The mirror fragments left behind by Mirror Gardner are closely tied to the special mirror world in Fourth Epoch Trier. My intuition suggests it might be linked to the current state of the Primordial Demoness.
"As for this armor, it's quite special. Wearing it will lead to some fortuitous encounters. Heh heh, ever thought of transforming into a beautiful woman or a handsome lad four to five meters tall?"
After playfully providing basic information about the various items, Magician nodded slightly and added, "Once I'm done, I'll send them back along with the information, and you'll receive an official reward.
"Seven of Wands, it's time for you to leave Trier for a while. The Iron and Blood Cross Order's mission has concluded. Your only task is to inform that mister. I'm confident he'll comprehend and accept it."
Recalling his involvement in two consecutive catastrophes in Trier, Lumian concisely acknowledged and stated, "I share the same sentiment. I intend to track down the remaining April Fool's members."
Magician shifted her attention to Franca.
"Your next steps will hinge on the Demoness Sect's reaction. Remember to report to your Major Arcana card holder when the time comes."

After Franca acknowledged, Magician glanced at Anthony and Jenna.
"When the aftershocks settle, inquire if they'd like to draw a Minor Arcana card and join the Tarot Club. If they decline, don't push it. I'll ensure they keep it a secret."
Franca asked cheerfully, "Will they become Minor Arcana card holders under you?"
Magician smiled.
"Not necessarily. It's a matter of fate."
Addressing Lumian, she advised, "No need to rush your departure. You can lay low for a few days. Head back to Auberge du Coq Doré for now. I sense a fortuitous encounter of fate awaits you there."
Fortuitous encounter of fate? Lumian was puzzled, but it was evident that Madam Magician had no intention of providing specifics. Perhaps she had glimpsed something but not the full details.
In the next moment, Madam Magician and the objects around her dissolved into starlight and disappeared.
"How surreal..." Franca remarked genuinely.
Turning to Lumian with a pensive expression, she mused, "Do you think Madam Magician might be the Angel of Stars from the Church's Bible?"
"No way..." Lumian instinctively responded before sinking into contemplation.
...
Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré.
As Lumian ascended to the second floor, he noticed a figure crouched outside his door.
It was a chubby, earnest-looking seven- or eight-year-old boy, toting a dark-red school bag.
Ludwig? Baron Brignais's monstrous adopted son? Lumian furrowed his brows and approached.
"What's the matter?"
Ludwig, with his yellow hair and brown eyes, stood up and implored, "Can you help me leave Trier? I don't want to stay in the Church of Knowledge any longer. I don't want to be under Brignais's control. I don't want to deal with homework or tests. I can reward you!"
"Reward?" Lumian arched an eyebrow.
Could this be the fortuitous encounter of fate Madam Magician mentioned?
Ludwig vigorously nodded.
"Yes."
Without hesitation, he unzipped the dark-red hard school bag,

revealing a stack of papers.
"I stole this from the Church of Knowledge. No, I brought it here."
Lumian extended his hand, accepting the papers, and quickly scanned the front page.
"Number: 01."
"Name: Deity's Fallen Banner, Salinger's Blood Banner."
"Danger Grade: 0. Extremely Dangerous. It's of the highest importance and of the highest confidentiality. It is not to be inquired, disseminated, described, or spied."
Information on Grade 0 Sealed Artifacts? And it's 0-01! Lumian's forehead and eyelids twitched simultaneously.
He was aware that the Churches had sealed numerous mystical items with significant harmful and negative effects, categorized into four grades. "3" was the lowest, and "0" was the highest. A "1" often indicated a threat to Saints and the potential for a catastrophic event. The implications of "0" were evident.
Lumian's gaze shot up to Ludwig, realizing that the boy's face betrayed nothing out of the ordinary, only pleading.
He lowered his head, swiftly absorbing the rest of the content.
"Security Clearance: Only messengers of God."
"Sealed Method: Place it in an underground mausoleum with a large number of soldier mannequins. Construct a cemetery with more than a million corpses above it, supplemented by a real city with a population of more than 100,000. The exact execution and ritual arrangements are..."
"Description: This is a charred banner. The flagpole is iron-black metal, and there are a large number of dangerous blood spots on the banner.
"...Beyonders with strength surpassing Sequence 5 are forbidden from approaching. Warning, Beyonders with strength surpassing Sequence 5 are forbidden from approaching!
"...The experimentalist responsible for changing the soldier mannequins must be blindfolded and carry a lantern... If the lantern is extinguished, the experimentalist will vanish. Everyone who knows him will believe that he's long dead... If he's not blindfolded, the one who leaves the mausoleum will be a monster resembling him...
"...The City of Exiles, Morora, on the surface often encounters extreme weather, including but not limited to hurricanes, torrential rain, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions...
"...There were originally no volcanoes around Morora...
"...The inhabitants of Morora are unusually belligerent. There are numerous duels with fatal casualties every day, and protests and riots occur more than six times a year...

"...The residents of Morora have no intention of leaving this city. At any moment..."
"...According to ancient texts, it has witnessed the demise of at least two true gods..."
Dammit, can I even read this? The more Lumian read, the more alarmed he became.
He looked at Ludwig in bewilderment and questioned once more, "Did you really steal it?"
Could information of this gravity be stolen so easily?
Ludwig, looking like a child, wanted to retort, but he nodded sincerely.
"Yes."
Frowning at the boy, Lumian fell into a profound silence.
(End of Volume—Conspirer)